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WESTERN ACTION

JULY

15¢

GUN-TRAIL TO BOOTHILL

FEATURE NOVEL

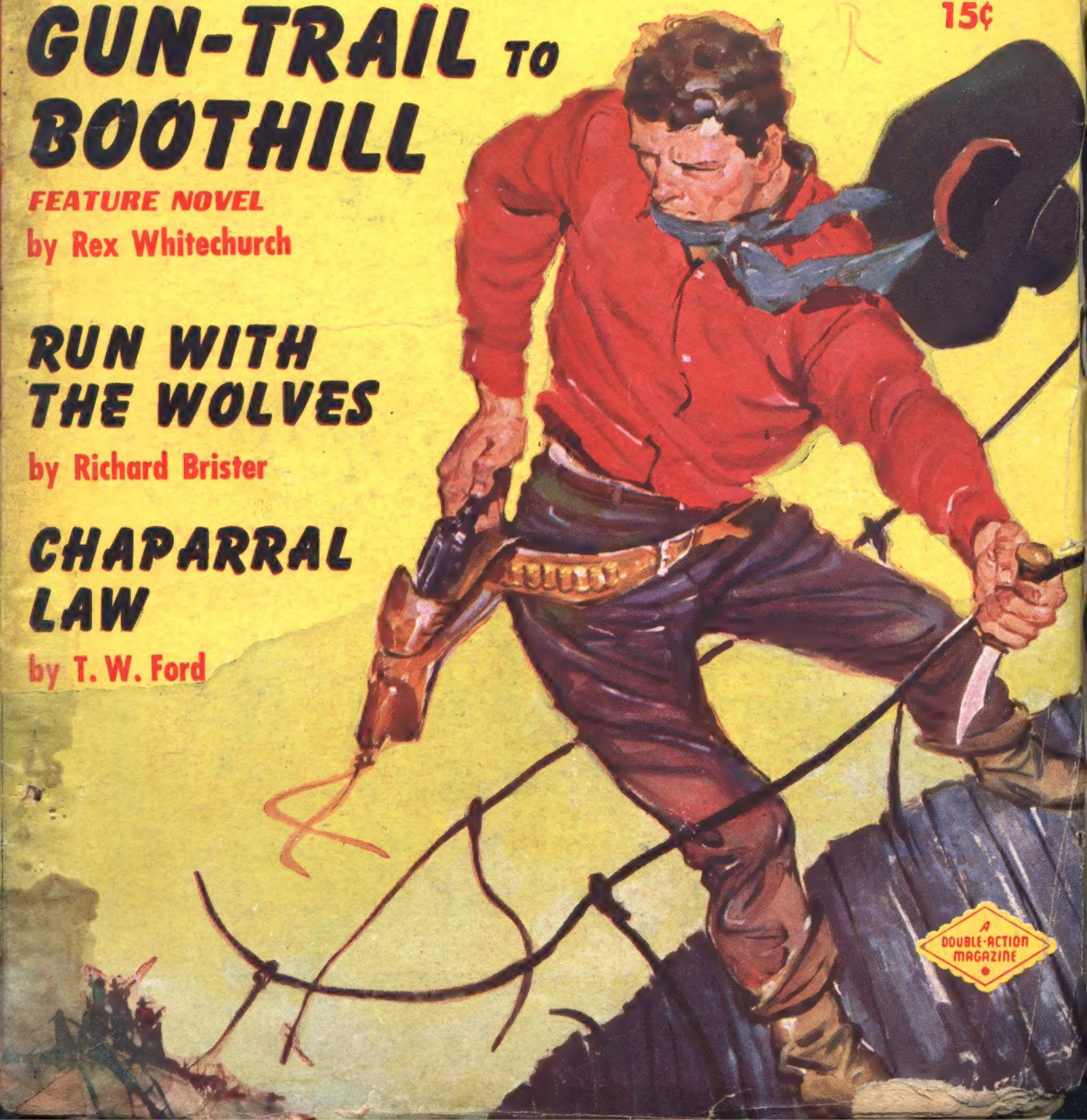
by Rex Whitechurch

RUN WITH THE WOLVES

by Richard Brister

CHAPARRAL LAW

by T. W. Ford



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WESTERN ACTION

VOLUME 14 JULY, 1950 NUMBER 5

Feature Novel

GUN-TRAIL TO BOOTHILL.....Rex Whitechurch 8

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Short Stories

CHAPARRAL LAW.....T. W. Ford 72

Bart Mundy had a score to settle with Big Mike Corfee, and Mundy's bunch had the train held; but Corfee had the passengers to side him!

LAW DOG'S PATIENCE.....E. E. Clement 78

Lem had made some high-sounding boasts about how he was going to find a killer who left no traces; now, at the end of his rope, he had one more night to make good.

RUN WITH THE WOLVES.....Richard Brister 81

Jimmy had heard how there were only two kinds of people, the sheep and the wolves; and he didn't want to suffer the fate of sheep...

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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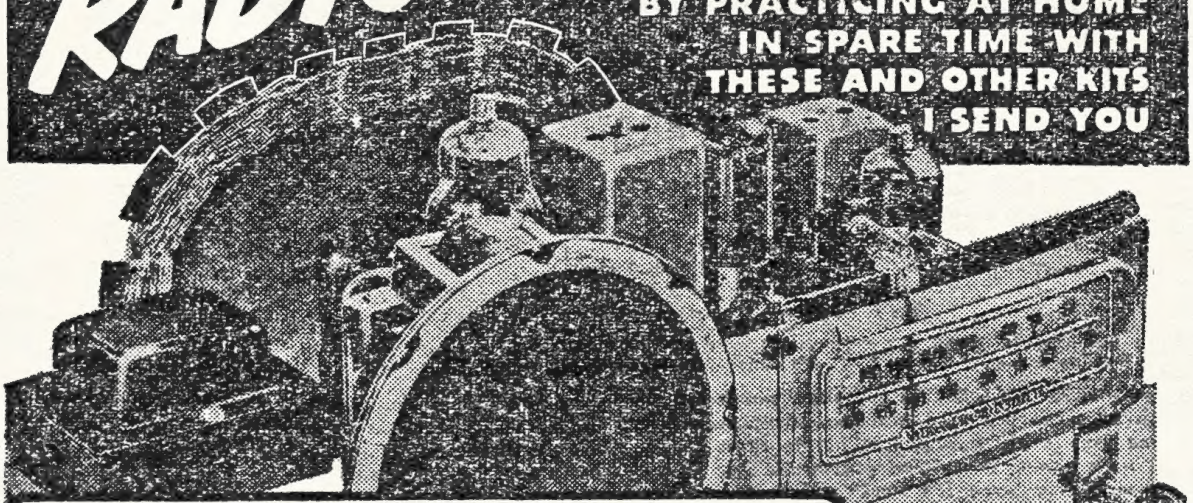

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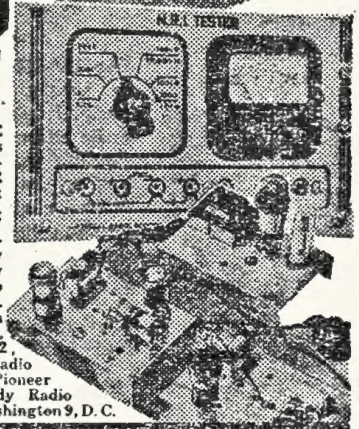

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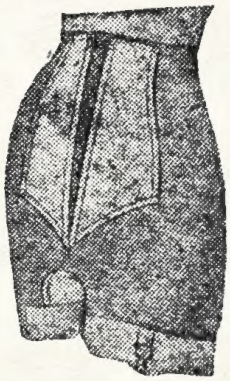

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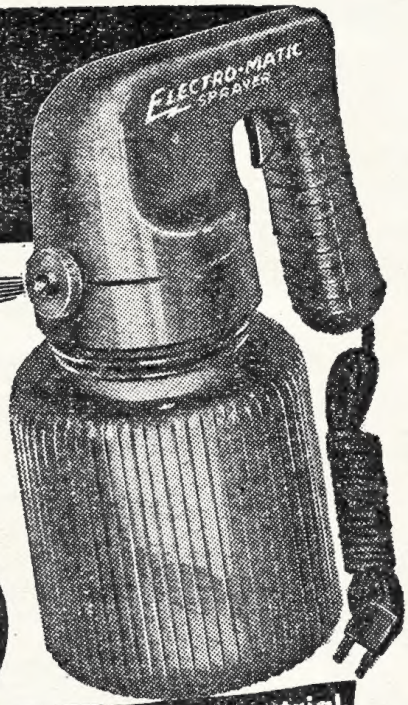

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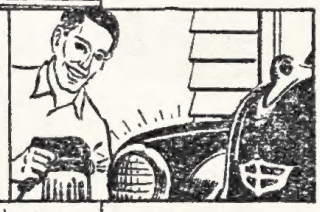

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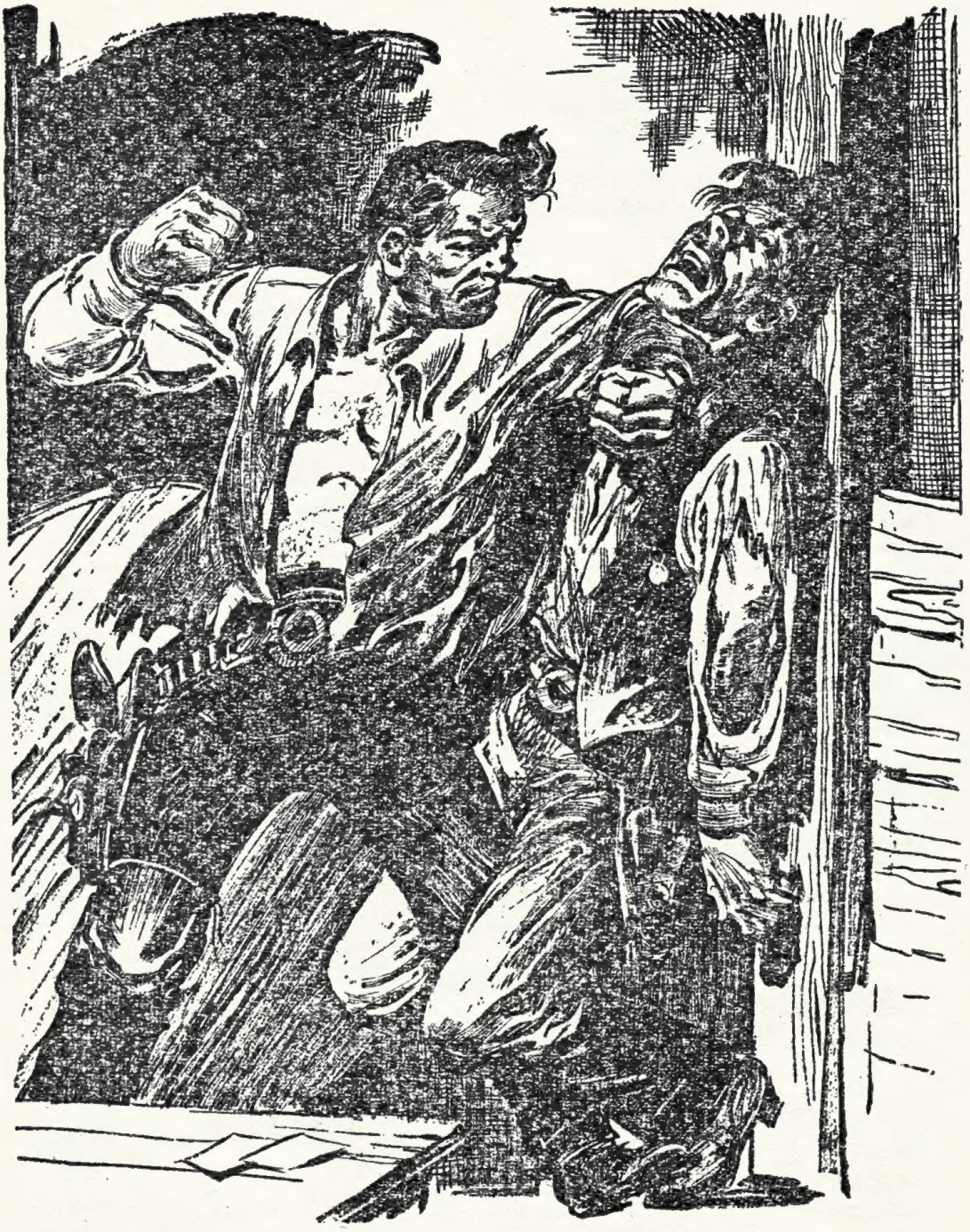
Bess Queen was watching the fight with avid interest.

Gun - Trail to Boothill

Dynamic Feature Novel

by Rex Whitechurch



The long hunt for the murderer of Bob Dalton's wife brought the Missouri outlaw to the lair of the sinister Bess Queen, most deadly of women lobo-leaders. And Dalton had to prove himself against the helling Coronados to stay alive!

BOB DALTON walked his horse across the ford where bottom sands shone through the water. A lonely willow stood over a sunken place in the ground, and a crow or scavenger bird, jeered the man who had stopped beside the grave. At least once a year Bob paid his respects to the girl whose laughing eyes he could still see.

He doffed his wide, stiff-brimmed hat, pulling at the sweaty chin-strap. The wind tugged at his rebellious black hair; and his gray eyes, bright as new steel, sparkled with unashamed tears. He did not say a word as he bent down on his knees, but his head stayed bowed a long time.

He rose up, a man of medium height, with wide shoulders and slim, agile legs. He had a horseman's looseness about him, and the sun had bronzed his high cheek-boned face. In his features was something as solid as the headstone of the grave, and the same somberness was there.

"It surely must be awfully lonesome for you here, Yvonne. It has been a long time but it seems like it happened yesterday. There's not going to be a single minute of forgetfulness. Someday I'll find him. I'll never stop hunting him until I do."

He had made this same speech to her five years; and the trails he had followed had taken him everywhere, and had brought him back again. The year now was 1881, the place was a few miles from Nebraska City, on the Missouri River. It had seemed to Bob Dalton that every road had led him back to her.

Bob Dalton climbed into the saddle and slowly turned King back toward the tributary and its rustling water at the ford. Between the river and the slough was a lane that led straight to the trail to Nebraska City. He did not look back; he left the carrion birds jeering him and rode on through the antagonism of a hateful sun.

* * *

He had been riding a long time and he was tired; his muscles had begun to cramp. As he rode he kept his eyes alert and so spotted the spirals of dust he could see on his back trail. Somebody was moving along in his wake.

Dalton suddenly wondered how long he had been followed; and his puzzlement grew. Twice before he had seen those curling clouds of dust, about the same distance behind him. Perhaps for ten miles he had been followed.

The late morning was still a flaming inferno when he rounded a bend in the trail and came upon a cabin, low and long and solidly put together. He saw King cock his ears, and the stallion brought his head up, warned by the click of a rifle's mechanism. A man moved forward on the porch, with a brown-haired girl standing in the open door. There was less than ten feet between the two, when Bob discovered the armed and obviously threatening man on the shaded porch.

The cabin did not stand more than twenty feet from the dusty wagon road. There was an enormous cottonwood directly in front of the house; and toward this, and toward the half leveled carbine, the outlaw rode with an easy grace.

He could see the man quite well. Dalton was not surprised because he had been seeing that kind of man everywhere since he had crossed the Nebraska line. He was tall and gaunt and lean featured; harsh-faced and browned by the sun and the wind. He wore a hickory shirt, open at the throat, and blue jeans that fitted his thin legs to a glove's snugness. He had on cowhide boots, and the copper on their toes caught the sun glints and flung them off with a singular brightness.

The rifle was half ready for use, and Bob knew the slack had been taken out of the trigger. "Hold up there, Mister," said Dalton, pulling his mount to a halt. "I don't mean you no harm—"

The heavy, high-bridged nose of the other showed that he was definitely boss of any situation; the girl's face was attractive, more so because of her strained expression and the distant fear Dalton saw beneath the pallor.

THE ANSWER Bob Dalton awaited was slow in coming. The girl studied the man with the rifle, but he did not look at her, keeping his eyes clamped upon the stranger. His eyes relented a little but his voice was cold. "I reckon you can

get down, pilgram. I don't allow strangers to stop here as a rule. In your case I'll make an exception on account of that black beauty of a horse you're riding."

Dalton dismounted; he stood at the west end of the porch, rolled himself a smoke, and thought: *The girl is glad I came here—I wonder why.* The lean, sallow-faced man still held the gun when Dalton sat down on the end of the porch.

His tall host said, "I reckon you can use a drink of water. The bucket's in the kitchen, and Shella will show you how to find it. You will get a good drink and maybe fill your canteen, and rest here a few minutes in the shade, and then like a good fellow who appreciates such a favor, you will be on your way. We jist don't have no more hospitality than that to give to strangers."

His words were curt and distinct; Bob Dalton wondered if he was afraid of the law.

He followed the girl through the steamy hot cabin; the girl showed him a wooden bucket and he helped himself to a drink.

Suddenly there was a hand placed timidly upon his arm, and the girl's voice whispered so low that he could barely distinguish her words: "We are the Coronados. I have seven uncles and only one of them is a good man. He's the marshal at Neb City. You can trust him, but you can't trust the others. I am not a Coronado. I was taken from a band of Indians by Jake out there on the porch. He bought me for two horses, and I have been with him ever since. That was ten years ago and I'm seventeen now. You have to be very careful in what you say to Jake. People do not like us, and in town we are regarded as poison. You can figure the rest out for yourself. Only—you just be awful careful, please."

They went out through the front room, the girl leading the way.

JAKE CORONADO was still interesting himself in a close inspection of the black stallion. The horse watched him warily and with unwanted suspicion in his beady eyes. Coronado had watered him from a bucket.

"I wouldn't get too close to him," Bob said, stepping to the edge of the porch. "King is mighty shy of strangers. He killed a man once, and crippled another for life. They were trying to steal him. He's a fast, durable steed but he's not for sale."

"Can he run?" said Jake Coronado, squinting out from beneath his very heavy eyebrows. "How fast can he run? Did you ever clock him?"

Bob showed an amused grin. "They call him Ebony Lightning around the Missouri racetracks. His father was a wild stallion." Dalton coolly eyed Coronado who still held the rifle clasped across his stomach. "You must have a lot of horses here on this ranch. I take it you are a horse lover."

"The best that money can buy," said Jake Coronado; "I don't fool with cheap stuff. I'd like to make you an offer for this fellow, one that I think might interest you. I pay well for my horses because I sell them high."

Bob left the porch and sauntered to his horse. He stepped to the saddle and clasped his hands around the horn. He gave the girl a short smile. "No," he said, "King is not on the market. But—thanks for admiring him. Shows you know your business. Thanks, too, for the water, and I'll do as you said a moment ago to show my appreciation—I'll be running along."

Coronado's returning smile was full of ambiguity. He nodded and went back to the porch; then footsteps sounded around the house and a man with two Frontier "Walker" model revolvers in black holsters on a sagging double shell belt, came slowly into sight. He had a thin angular face, and the same hawk nose that distinguished Jake Coronado's. But he was bigger and tougher.

This newcomer was younger, Bob saw, and raven hair covered his skull and made a low line on his forehead. His butternut gray clothes were be-

smeared with dust and his thick lips curled themselves into a dangerous grin. He shoved a black wool hat forward on his head, waved his hand at Jake and said. "You lettin' him ride off with a horse like that without tryin' to drive an acceptable bargin?"

Bob Dalton removed his sodbuster and wiped the sweat band with a blue bandanna. His ebony hair glistened with moist brilliance. The man with the rifle had not budged out of his tracks. The second man slithered forward and paused at the end of the porch.

"What about the stallion?" Jake Coronado had found his voice. "What would you say if I was to offer six hundred dollars and another horse to boot? You couldn't get half that much on the open market." Then he added, "You think that's a good offer, Grat?"

"I'd say what I did a minute ago," Bob answered, cool and level-toned. "Thanks for the water." He tautened the bridle reins, looked at Grat Coronado.

"I sure hate to see you ride off with that black critter," said the latter fervently. "We buy horses and have got places to sell them if they're good ones. Seems my brother has made you a good offer, too, and can't figger out why you'd turn it down. What if I was to tell you I know you're Bob Dalton, outlaw and fugitive and that there's a price on your head that amounts to twice what Jake offered for your nag? I can use the reward money right well, Dalton. Jake—you raise that gun a little higher and I think we'll get the stallion—"

Bob watched Jake Coronado's face harden, but he did not move the rifle. Bob could see the girl's frightened eyes peering at him. She stood inside the doorway and one hand clutched her soft throat. He owed the girl something. She had asked him to be careful. For that reason he stayed cool.

Bob was surprised when another man hove into view, dripping wet with sweat, with his hat off and his tall thin figure clad in black wool. He was dark as an Indian and his thin mouth was long and curled into a leer; the way he wore his guns gave him the same stamp the other newcomer couldn't get away from.

Jake cast a quick covert glance at the third man and shook his head. "No gun play, Decker," he said. "We're not going to raise our guns against a man in trouble. You know how I feel about them things. The man you call Dalton is free to go his way, and none of us will try to stop him. They got a tough marshal over at Neb City. He's some of my relation, but we don't get along. You'd better watch him, Dalton. Now, come on, get out of here while your hide's whole."

"I guess I owe you thanks again." Bob turned his horse warily. He had to make the move. Then he whispered to King and the stallion jumped forward. He tore the ground up as he streaked for the road, twenty feet away. Bob expected the jerking jolt of a bullet, but it didn't come. When he glanced back over his shoulder, the three renegade horse traders were grouped together, watching him. The girl stood on the edge of the porch, and she was watching him, too. He lifted his hat and waved.

* * *

BOB DALTON'S cautious ride away from Jake Coronado's horse ranch took place at eleven o'clock in the morning, and because there were no trees to speak of along the trail to Nebraska City, there were no shadows. It was a furtive, tedious journey. He knew he was going away from danger, yet danger lurked in the future and sneered at him.

He gave little thought to the girl Shella until she suddenly came into his mind as he made camp beside a bustling creek. Then he saw something he had missed. It was her startling, unforgettable beauty of face and figure, and the sadness of her face.

Funny that she reminded him of

his beloved Yvonne...

When morning came and he had washed up in the creek and watered King, he rode slowly townward, with nothing in his mind but the girl. He had followed the covered trails in the past and through all their climates, but this morning's blazing heat punished him severely and left his face moist and burning.

"It must be all of a hundred and ten out here," he muttered. The touch of his saddle carbine stung his fingers like a red hot running iron. The edges of his saddle tortured him when his hands contacted them. And—behind him he again saw those mysterious fluffs of dust that warned him. The rider in his wake had not given up the trail; he was still being followed and watched.

The smooth duplicity of Jake Coronado and the open antagonism of his brother and the gunslick Decker, were things that challenged Dalton's mind, too. Why had Jake allowed him to depart so peacefully when Grat had suggested they take his horse away from him, hinting that because he was a fugitive from the law he would raise no rukus about it?

Doggedly the rider on his back trail stayed with him. Bob knew by this time that it was not a figment of his imagination, this mysterious horseman coming along behind him at about the same distance. When Bob walked his horse, the other rider did likewise and could not be shaken off.

The land was blue and motionless with an uncommon placidity. It was a-brim with the smell of the earth and parched grass and river bottom. King increased his gait and at one o'clock—Bob judged the time by the position of the sun—he rounded a turn in the road and came suddenly upon Nebraska City, whose main street was this widening trail.

THE TOWN stood upon level ground as smooth as a floor in a well-carpentered house. The street consisted of a double row of buildings on either side of a road sixty feet in width. Numerous falsefronts and small dwellings were scattered through the water-color vista. Beyond the residential dwellings the trail narrowed again and went into a beautifully developed apple country. Beyond the apple-belt was timber, and beyond the timber ranches and little fertile patches of corn land with cabins to house the sodbusters.

A plank bridge carried Bob Dalton over another creek; and not far in the distance on his right he could hear the lashing of the Missouri River and the toot of a steamboat whistle. In the middle of main street was a narrow road that cut through to form four corners. It was a trail and river town, rapidly growing into a small city of importance to the settlers, with a steamboat traffic that had attracted the interest of St. Louis and Kansas City builders. One of the biggest saloons in the west occupied a prominent niche in the hall of local fame. *The Mansion* was regarded as second to none; if you couldn't get it at the *Mansion* you couldn't get it in Chicago, they said.

The bank was called *Home Place* and stood in the middle of the block west of the crossroads; Bess Queen's General Store attracted business from miles away; then there was a wagon yard, a carpenter shop, a comfortable hotel of large capacity, and numerous other small lodging houses. Behind the *Star Livery Stable* were the fair grounds which covered a large section of land and that boasted a mile-long race track. Although the main stores were compressed into a three block area, divers other such establishments extended in all directions away from the center of town. Occasionally you heard a steamboat's shrill whistle as a boat moved into the levee.

Bob put his horse in the stable and looked over the interior so he would know how to find King in case of an emergency. He hung his saddle on a peg on a post, put the rest of his gear there and sauntered out to the street. He spotted a group

of horsemen riding through the boiling dust, but saw no sign of anyone he figured could be the mysterious rider. He was startled to see the gunhawk Decker and Jake Coronado's burly brother, Grat. They rode into the barn.

Dalton walked through the yellow dust to the *Mansion* and slapped the batwings apart. He stopped inside the door and, hooking his thumbs in his heavy shell belt, regarded the spacious and elaborate saloon with amazement.

The fixtures were mahogany; there was a countless row of mirrors, large and small; there was a hint of red plush on the pillars that ran through the middle of the room. The red plush was in the form of upholstery for the round benches that encircled the carved wooden posts, which bore some resemblance to totem poles and which undoubtedly had cost a mint of money. The bar was a block long, and the beauty of the back bar held his gaze. Crystal chandeliers threw off a dazzling brightness and the amber-tinted light from these rested the sun strained eyes of the average trail pounder. Murals on the red walls were painted in garish colors and represented Biblical scenes. Those murals had been done by a celebrated European artist.

A gallery went around three sides of the room about ten feet above the floor. A wide staircase, covered with a Brussels carpet ran up to the gallery from about midway of the saloon, and on the balcony were booths and the office of George Ellsworth, sole owner and proprietor of *The Mansion.* This man had brought his ideas with him from San Francisco; he had had a great deal to do in the building of the greatest hotel this side of New York, *The World,* as it was called in Saint Joe. He had lavished his entire capital on this effort to go the *World Hotel* one better.

Bob decided on a drink, and edged through the crowd to the bar. He saw a stout, black-clothed man standing at the end of the bar, found the man's face interesting. The whiskey was sharp, raw, stung all the way down.

The dark-clad man whirled suddenly and strode angrily across the room. At the High Limit table he reached out and seized a sleepy dealer, yanked him out of his chair. Bob knew he had been watching this man from his vantage point at the end of the bar. The dealer came quickly to life. Resentment was in his voice when he barked, "What the hell you doing, Ellsworth?"

The other players had risen to their feet, watching, intent; the dealer's slim hand was inside his long black coat. He had a nasty leering look. His black eyes were shifty.

"I've kept an eye on you, Dellis." Ellsworth snapped. "You're not worth a damn to me. Go to the office and get your stuff and get out of here; I don't want you around the *Mansion.* Here's your money."

Ellsworth dropped a handful of crumpled bills upon the green baize of the table. Dellis stepped back, took two steps then drew a gun from inside his coat. It was a small, double sprouted Derringer.

Bob yelled and the man glanced sharply over his shoulder, just as Ellsworth hit him. He went lurching back toward Bob. The latter caught Dellis before he stopped spinning, pinned his arms to his sides and held him there, squirming.

"Thanks, friend," said Ellsworth. "I owe you one." By now the bouncers were there and they roughly ejected Dellis from the saloon. Bob turned back to the bar, aware that Ellsworth had resumed his place beside him and had closed the High Limit table. But the man did not address Bob again, and Dalton saw a black line of mustache, a square jaw, two bitter ash gray eyes and a broad thin mouth, an acrimonious mouth. He was impeccable in black store clothes, a white string tie and a brown silk shirt; his coat was long, reached far below his hips.

The man's word seemed to be the law. He had closed the High Limit table without apology to the four

men who had been interested in a game which had just reached its climax, with the house losing, when Ellsworth had interrupted it. There was no apparent resentment on behalf of the players.

Bob caught a sudden, stirring odor of food from the hotel across the street. The effect brought something acridly to life in his stomach. He asked for a glass of water.

Dalton knew that here in this fastidious place, which was open to dusty and booted cowboys as well as the more refined classes of trade, lay danger because it attracted the kind of men who were dangerous.

Hooking his thumbs in his wide shell belt and giving no more regard to the happening that had brought him invisibly closer to the owner of the *Mansion,* he stomped on across the floor to the street door and went out. Still Ellsworth had said nothing to him, but Bob knew his eyes were on his back as he stepped through the batwings. He saw Grat Coronado across the street, near the hotel. The renegade gave him a close glance.

THE DUSTY street was flaming hot. The sun streamed down brassy and threw its searing weight against the small windows of the bank. Before the facade of the hotel was a small group of horses, left exposed to the annoyance of the heat and a million insects.

A vigilant man sauntered out into the broad daylight, emerging from the hotel. He stood tall and his shoulders were sharply edged. A soft-brimmed Stetson sat aft on his head. When he achieved the rim of the walk, he paused and looked swiftly around him.

A badge gleamed on his gray and red checkered shirt. He wore dark suspenders and dark trousers and low black boots that were bright and low-heeled with red thumb holders on the tops. He was smooth shaven, and his face was long and sandy, his eyes were light blue. A single black-butted gun rested in a tan holster, slanting downward across his flat stomach, and his cartridge belt was high and taut. A black string tie fluttered from his collar; when he removed his Stetson to wipe the sweat band Bob saw that his hair was the color of clean straw.

This would be, he thought rapidly, Jake Coronado's "relation", as the renagade had called it, who did not have any use for Jake. *Hell in boots,* Bob thought, weighing that peculiar way in which Coronado wore his gun and the strong defiant chin. *He surely does look the picture.*

Bob tarried until the marshal had walked around the hotel corner, going up the narrow road to the west. Being wanted, and the object of thousands of reward posters, he knew he could not afford to take chances. Then he entered the hotel, signed the register, and went back to the stable to get his war-bag.

He climbed the hotel's complaining stairway to an upper room. He took off his shirt and filled the wash-bowl from the pitcher; when he bathed he felt the quick cracking of the film of dust on his face and the soap made his skin tingle.

He discarded his dusty shirt and produced a black wool double-breasted style from his bag and donned it. He combed his hair, picked up the pitcher and took a drink; on a day as hot as this one a man's thirst was hard to quench. With his thirst still unslaked, he left the room, locked the door and put the key in his shirt pocket. He stomped down the steps and found a vacant table in the dining room. A wan-faced girl with listless eyes came to serve him.

Bob sat back on his chair, relaxing his muscles, with that hunted, furtive feeling keeping him nervously alert. He was never away from the sense of danger even when he slept. He ate his meal when it came and read a printed notice on the wall about the coming country fair, which was to begin on the morrow. *Running races —Big Purses. You are invited to bring your fastest horses—*

The energy of his meal left him stimulated and the weariness gave

way to a new and sturdy freshness of spirit. He rolled up a cigarette. But he knew the old restlessness would come back and those turbulent pictures from his past would be projected upon the screen of his brain... Then he saw a woman come gracefully into the dining room, and caught the shine of her eyes and was momentarily jolted by the intensity of her stare.

She was looking directly at him. She was quite young, and her hair was blonde, and her upper body was gracefully rounded. In her beauty was a song that struck upon his being and left his senses excited.

As she went by him to a table beside an open street window he surveyed her methodically. He rose up and, walking with muscical spurs to the door, hesitated and turned around, drawn by an invisible and incomprehensible power, and he looked directly at her again. He saw that her gaze was still directed at him. She did not look away when their eyes met. Instead, she held his glance, imprisoned it, shackled it. When she was ready, she discarded it, with an air that implied perfect satisfaction in what she had seen.

He returned to the stable to water his horse, then went back to the *Mansion* and bought a sack of tobacco, and lingered, with his hands on the bar. A crowd drifted in. He did not stay long; there was always danger in crowds, in the presence of men who had ridden far. When he left he walked quickly out through the spirals of dust, toward the store on the corner. He knew now what he was going to do, and there was no cause for delay.

A man stepped out of the shadows of the awning in front of the store, and his voice came in a clear, reaching whisper: "You better be careful, Dalton."

"Why?"

"The marshal's alert. He's no deadhead; he's looking for fugitives, that on account of the beginning of the fair tomorrow. He figgers the town will be full of wanted men. The jail's business will flourish. The marshal—Jackson Coronado is fast with his guns. He used to law in Saint Joe and he's proud of his record of sixteen notches. Don't forget the reward posters on you, Dalton. Now one last parting shot, fella. I think you'll find what you're looking for here; you won't have to go any further. Just bear that in mind and don't go against the wind. Keep your head up."

Bob looked at the man; the latter was sliding away in the heat and the sweat and the insects, cool, even nonchalant, with not a drop of perspiration on him.

Bob walked on into the store, with something pounding in his veins. He remembered he'd had a feeling of something of the kind, all day, and now he was sure of his dream becoming a cold realization. He turned, looked at the broad back of the blackclad man he had seen at the *Mansion*, and entered the depths of the store.

BOB MADE a cigarette as he paused at the counter. The long, wide room was loaded with a stock of merchandise that would have done justice to the storeroom of a well-supplied army post. The store held everything from bolts of drygoods to hardware and firearms; a full line of staple and fancy groceries, and there was a brand new wagon wheel painted vivid red and green propped, against a barrel of flour. But there was not a single customer present. Across the rear, about sixty feet back from the front door was a heavy partition and a solid door that had a peep-hole in the upper panel.

A sanguine, hatchet-faced clerk in a cheap print shirt and gaudy yellow sleeve holders, putting some canned goods on a shelf, paused and squinted down from a short ladder. "Somethin', Mister?" He came down the ladder, his skeletal hands clasped to the wood rounds and he turned round to face Bob.

"Yes," Bob said. "I want to see the boss; her name's Queen, isn't it?"

The name had a strange effect on

the clerk; his eyes narrowed behind the glasses and then opened wide. "You will find her in the office, back there through the door, on the right of the hall." His voice had changed; there was respect and there was awe in it.

Without comment, Bob stamped on toward the door with the peep-hole looking at him like an ominous eye. He twisted the iron knob, pushed the door back and emerged cautiously into a lamplit corridor. The yellow beams from a big ceiling light, chased away the dusty shadows. Bob hesitated, charmed by the uncanny silence and the sense of danger that was pushing in against him; then coolly and gently he knocked on the door on his right.

"Come in!" There was a refinement and a cordiality in the woman's voice; Bob Dalton turned the knob and entered the room.

It was a square boxlike room, with a carpet and comfortable fixtures. The walls were ornamented with Indian blankets. He saw a platform rocker, padded with horsehair, three straight chairs with rawhide bottoms, a huge glass case full of guns, and a heavy desk against the back wall. At the desk sat a woman whose eyes were strangely alive with an alertness that took everything in about her visitor at the first cold glance. But the amazing thing was the small pistol she clasped in her right hand with the double barrels of the Derringer pointed straight at the man in the open door!

THE WOMAN'S face was pale and impassive.

"I hardly know what to say," Bob began feigning surprise (he had been posted and knew this woman, knew about her background and the danger she could unleash), "but I can say this—you don't need the pistol, Queen."

She shrugged disdainfully and her voice was angry when she answered: "I'll do the talking." She had red hair. It was darker than flame red. With the golden light on it her heavy hair was copper tinted. She had a redhead's complexion. Her low-collared white waist was uncommonly tight fitting across the deep bulges of her breasts. She was slim. Her eyes were jade green; her mouth was small; her long face was not devoid of a comely something-or-other. But the impression Bob got, at first sight, was that here was a woman who looked disturbingly like a hardened spinster who was not interested in men. She was about thirty he concluded.

Queen went on, speaking with a softness that didn't match the threat of the gun. She had taken the slack out of the triggers. "You are Bob Dalton; you are wanted by the federal law; there is a price of twelve hundred dollars on your hide. You are a skilled gunfighter; you have a surprising speedy draw; you came here seeking work. I know the man who sent you."

She paused and jiggled the pistol up and down and her red mouth was a cruel line despite the fullness of her lips. "I have no use for you, Mister Dalton; I am not impressed. You may be the toughest man this side of Boothill, but I don't see it in your face or in anything about you. You've been lucky. I have men working for me who could devour you whole and leave not a leg for you to stand on. Your fame doesn't mean anything to me. I have to know my men and know what they can do before I take chances. I have been warned that you might be a representative of the anti horse-thief association and very dangerous to deal with."

He blushed, uncertain of himself now. "I guess you've got it all figgered out," he said in self defense. "Only you've been figgerin' wrong."

"You stop talking," she ordered, and he saw anger deepen in her eyes. "Nothing you could say would change my mind about you." She got up and walking to another door, opened it and said, "Come in, Grat."

A man appeared, a big man with strong shoulders and long muscular arms. Although he had his head lowered and was not facing Bob, the lat-

ter recognized him. Drums began to pound in Bob Dalton's head. Grat Coronado—he might have known—

The woman's dim smile touched Bob and her jade green gaze turned away, to meet the glance of the man Bob had met on the Coronado horse ranch.

"Grat," she said harshly, turning to cover Bob with the Derringer, "remove his gun. Then take him over there to the stock-room and give him a working over. We'll teach him a few things. I want him to remember his meeting with Bess Queen; you know what to do."

Bob thought of making a gamble of it, but what he saw in Bess Queen's enigmatic orbs warned him not to be brash. Bess Queen was on an equal footing with Belle Starr, the woman bandit's match in cruelty and cunning.

But it was the man, it was Grat Coronado, who held Bob Dalton's deepest interest right now. He allowed the heavier-boned and thicker man to disarm him. The woman opened the door, with a snaky agility in her movements. Bob was grabbed and hurled into the spooky corridor. Another door was opened by the woman, who walked ahead of them, and then before Bob could raise his hands to protect himself, a gigantic fist sledged him to the floor in the candle-lighted stock room. The blow blinded him, left him weak. He lifted himself on his left elbow and heard the woman's inhuman mocking laughter.

2

BESS QUEEN said, "Let him up; you've got him groggy. It won't be hard for you to keep him that way."

But Dalton had better ideas about that. He crawled painfully erect; the woman's jeering laughter had angered him and a coldness enveloped his brain—and when cold like this he was dangerous. A man had his habits and his moods; they did not vary much.

In the long hunt for the man that had murdered his young wife, after she had rowed across the river from the Missouri side to meet him—he had been delayed— Bob Dalton had experienced numerous encounters with women of the rawhide ilk; he had camped out with Belle Starr, and had seen her torture a lawman who had failed to exercise the caution of a man of his position should have mastered. So he was ready to expect anything from Bess Queen.

He was ready to fight; his brain had cleared quickly, and he disregarded the double-barreled Derringer in the woman's hand.

Coronado came at Bob from a low, back-bent crouch, jumping suddenly from this position with hard-striking fists. Grat's right hand found him. The man was fast for one of his powerful build. The blow almost floored Bob again; a million stars went pirouetting through his head. Driven against the wall Bob felt his breath stop and the room was in motion when he heard a bell ring in his brain. The floor jumped at him. A flurry of shorter, less severe licks found his stomach, straightened him, and warm blood gushed down his face.

Dalton shoved his right hand out against the blurred face of his opponent, throwing more shoulder power into the sledging impact than he realized, and Coronado ran backwards, his hard, tall heels tattooing the floor boards. He slithered forward, still dazed, but determined to follow up his momentary advantage.

Bob heard the woman say: "Tear into him, Grat! Hammer his head to a pulp. You've got him out—"

Grat Coronado lunged and another heavy fist exploded in Dalton's face.

* * *

JACKSON CORONADO, marshal of Nebraska City, was having a placid game of cribbage with Bill Crow, a stage driver, in the jail's front office. It was not yet noon. They were talking, the lawman tak-

ing the leading part in the conversation.

Bill Crow's face was hidden behind a bristling black beard and his graying hair was longish. "Consarn it," he grumbled, "here I been a-sittin' and a-listenin' to you, an' I've let you beat me again, Jackson. T'won't happen no more, though; you can bet your boots on that."

"So this Bob Dalton gives up his job lawin' for Dodge City and strikes out to follow the Owlhoot," Jackson Coronado continued. "His father was a traveling circuit judge over in Missouri and they lived in Saint Joe. They were true Missourians, or at least Bob was, though his father was a Virginian. There was just the one kid, and the old man had his heart set on making a lawyer out of his son. But Bob met a girl and decided he was tired of lawbooks and he hit for Nebraska, taking his young wife with him."

Bill Crow produced a cob pipe and quietly filled the bowl with tobacco from a leather pouch, lit a match and with the pipe burning freely, sat back in his chair to listen.

The marshal went on, his voice low but clear and warm. "I guess the fella had his heart and mind on being a sodbuster. He was a right good hand with horses and a natural born genius with guns. Everybody in the community over around Rulo liked him, and he was madly in love with his wife. Then he moved over to the Missouri side of the river and, just when everything was going fine, the locusts came and killed his crops and he got a job running a ferry boat."

"Yep," said Bill Crow, "I know the story from there, Jackson. They's a pack of renegades lyin' low on th' river—hoss-thieves they are—and one of them hoss thieves sees the girl. She has rowed acrost the Missouri to ride back with Bob, but she ventures too fur away from the boat that's tied up for a spell, lookin' for flowers or somethin', and th' waitin' hoss-rustler attacks her. He strangles her with a short piece of rope after he has finished with her, and when Bob finds his wife she's dead an' an awful sight and it kind of squeezes all the sense out of his mind. For a long time he's kind of crazy; he won't talk to nobody and he won't go nowheres near his friends. One day he ups and disappears, and the story has it that he just roams about the country, workin' for the law, and workin' against it, and not bein' satisfied to stay in any one place long enough to know he's been there. But it's a durned funny thing to me he ever become an outlaw... I'm kind of in sympathy with him."

Jackson Coronado moved a stack of reward placards on his desk, grabbed one off the top and studied it in the lamplight. "I am, too," he said.

A shadow fell across the doorway and both men looked quickly in that direction. Standing on the sidewalk, peering in at them, with a pink parasol over her head, was a blonde woman with a beautiful face. She was clad in stylish garments; a diamond breast pin sparkled at her throat.

"Excuse me," she said, stepping into the room. "I hope I'm not intruding and that I have something you will consider important enough to give me your attention for a moment. I have just come from the hotel, and in the dining room I heard two men talking about stealing somebody's black horse; when I entered my room I found that my jewel casket had been taken. I am very careless about not locking my door and there is some vague reason I keep thinking of those two rough men who are planning to get the black horse this afternoon as the ones who got my jewels."

Now if there was anything paramount among Marshal Jackson Coronado's other qualifications, it was his natural-born gallantry where the fair sex was concerned. He was on his feet in a second.

Jackson had never seen such a beautiful woman; he decided she wasn't more than twenty-five and that she had the prettiest eyes imaginable. Although he was not a sucker for a sad story, he was now thor-

oughly aroused. The story the girl had told him had not lacked serious conviction. The jewels, she said, were without value, save for a diamond brooch which had belonged to her mother. "I am a millinery salesman," she said. "I am from Kansas City, and I make this town about every six months with new hats for the woman of your community."

THE MARSHAL caught the fragrance of her taffy colored hair. She sat there, statuesque, with her hands folded in her lap and her eyes doing things to him he could not understand. When she had finished relating the events involving the theft of her jewels and the plan to steal the black horse at the livery stable, she got up and gracefully moved to the door. The lawman's thirty-year-old face was deeply lined for one so young.

"Just a minute," he said, from the desk, rising and slowly following her, "What is your name, please. I must have it for my records."

"Varlene Stafford," she said.

"Miss Stafford, would you be able to identify these men if you were to meet them again?"

"I'm afraid not," she said. "They were, for the most part, hidden from me by a colonnade. I am sure if they had seen me they would have lowered their voices."

"I'd suggest after this," he said sedately, "you lock your door upon leaving your room. This is wild country out here, and we don't have the coveniences of the city. About every fourth man you meet is a renegade; often he is a fugitive from justice. We have a number of border bandits, The James Boys, The Cassidy gang, and the most elusive and sensational of them all—Bob Dalton. The west is fast growing up, but it has not been long ago since it was wearing infant's clothing. In ten years you'll come back to Nebraska and find it very modern and civilized and prosperous, and Neb City will be a metropolis. We'll have steamboat traffic galore and big hotels and business houses that will be on an equal footing with the best in Kansas City and St. Louis. But those things take time and, while matters are adjusting themselves, it'll be wise of you to trust nobody and to look suspiciously upon every stranger."

"Thanks," said Varlene Stafford, and the smile she gave him was bewitching. "Thanks very much and if you recover my jewels I shall show you my gratitude by kissing you, and I don't run around kissing men. Yes, indeed—"

He was embarrassed. You never could tell about a woman; you never could tell about anyone, in fact. But —he was chagrined because he knew it was the officer's brain working. He had been at it so long.

She went out and left a lingering perfume behind her, and her voice left little echoes, too.

He was aware of the job he had to do, but he was not sorry. It would require time and patience and luck to find the jewel thief. He crossed the thoroughfare in the thick dust, and left Bill Crow in charge of the lockup. When Bill was out of work, he acted as the marshal's assistant; they made two trips a week on the Lincoln stage. Jackson had commissioned him a deputy.

Jackson shouldered through the batwings of the *Mansion*. The room was banked with gray smoke and sound pushed against him. He figured George Ellsworth was the best informed man in town on what was taking place in the underworld, and meant to make a few discreet inquiries.

The marshal saw the high built frame of his uncle. Jake Coronado was a colorful rascal, smart as a fox and about as hard to corner. Jackson had long suspected Jake of being implicated in a series of horse thefts in the vicinity of town.

But because he had desired greatly to find the ring-leader of the band, he had postponed having a direct showdown with Jake Coronado and his brother, Grat. The latter had just returned from a trip to Texas where he had gone on some vague mission; this morning Jackson

had seen him for the first time in three weeks.

Right now the marshal planned a little ruse to arouse the lighting so that he could sit back and watch where it struck.

BESIDES JAKE and two rough-looking colleagues, there was another fishy character in George Ellsworth's elaborate saloon— Blaine Decker, a gunhawk who had appeared in the community six months ago and hired out to Jake to wrangle horses on the latter's small spread. Word had drifted in that Decker was professionally fast with his guns and had killed two men in Texas.

The marshal paused with his back to a wooden column and saw Jake shift his eyes to his face—eyes that were full of dislike and suspicion. Then his companions turned slowly around and looked at Jackson, too, with no attempt to hide their animosity. George Ellsworth stood at the end of the bar, shrewd and tolerant, with an Indian's patience. The gambler's soft Stetson was on the back of his head and he had a cigar in his mouth.

Jackson caught his sudden, clever glance. But his manner suggested cool indifference; obviously Ellsworth did not care what happened to the three men at the bar.

Walking past his two uncles, the marshal finished tapering up his cigarette. He stopped and placed his arms on the mahogany, three feet from George Ellsworth. On his right, leaning on the bar, was a percentage girl, with very black eyes and black hair. She wore a perspiration-stained red spangled dress, yellow stockings and had a yellow bow in her hair. She was pretty, but in her face were thin lines that gave her a prematurely old look.

Jackson Coronado knew her as Pansy. She had never had another name as long as she had been in Neb City. Right now she was watching him with a strained, curious look. She edged down closer to him and said: "I may need your protection, Marshal. This afternoon Georgie canned Dellis. He's my husband and he's sore because I didn't walk out behind him. "I'm not going, and he'll get drunk and come in here after me; what would you do?"

Jackson did not have time to answer her. Dellis suddenly appeared and before George Ellsworth could interfere he had pushed his way to Pansy's side. "You double-crossing female rat; I'm going to blast you wide open—"

She screamed and shoved against him, but he was again going for the gun inside his coat. Jackson started forward, saw he couldn't reach the man in time to stop him from getting the gun out of his pocket and he spoke harshly.

"Leave her alone!" But the weapon flashed in Dellis' hand and he thrust it out at Pansy, canting his head and bowing his shoulders. "Leave—" Jackson had to act without a moment's hesitation. He slammed his own gun down across the bar and both weapons exploded at once. The girl screamed and bent down and her hair covered her face. Dellis spun and fell against her. Smoke eddied away from the two guns. Swinging round, with one hand grasping his shoulder, Dellis fired at the marshal.

The slug whined over Jackson's head. The gun had been aimed too high, and the bullet buried itself in the wall behind Ellsworth. Jackson made a dive, not wishing to kill the dealer, and grabbed him just as Pansy dropped woodenly to the floor. Blood covered her hands and Jackson, struggling to disarm Dellis, was made sick by the pitiful form sobbing on the floor. He struck Dellis twice with the barrel of his gun and with the man on his knees he twisted at the weapon. He had to bend Dellis' hand in close to the man's stomach and the dealer made a desperate effort to break his hold. It was then that the small double-barreled Derringer exploded. When Dellis sprawled face down, nearly carrying Jackson with him, he was dead.

All this had taken place in a few

fleeting seconds and Jackson Coronado, lifting his shoulders, gazed at the two crumpled forms and shuddered. It had been like this as long as he had worn that star; and sometimes he hated it. He was quick to move to the girl's side, kneeling beside her. George Ellsworth had her head on his shoulder and was trying to lift her, having dropped down to pull her erect.

"He's—he's a thief. No good..." The girl's voice faltered, but she finished with desperate courage. "He planned to steal a horse—a black horse and he knew I heard him plotting with another man. I don't know the other, but—but— Damn him, I hope he's dead and his soul rots the same as mine will. He—" She gasped and blood stained her mouth. Ellsworth pushed her hair back out of her face. He held her gently until the last trembling had gone.

WHEN THE body of the girl and the slain renegade had been removed, during which process Jackson had sat on a plush covered bench against a pillar, he walked over to the bar and wiped cold sweat from his forehead. He was shaky and two stiff drinks didn't help him. Death was like that, always stealing a surprise on its victims, often giving no warning in advance. Already the patrons of the *Mansion* had forgotten the double killing. Jackson moved down the bar to where Ellsworth stood. He felt like getting drunk.

Somehow he had a strange idea about George. He had never known another George Ellsworth. He felt a surreptitious wave of uneasiness running through him. It became a steady, pulsating sensation. He held up one finger and the skinny attendant served him straight whiskey. There was a jonquil glow on the saloon windows. Over the top of the doors he could see the entrance of the general store, owned and conducted by Bess Queen, a lady of elegance. He had never ceased to be aware of the stately redhead's compelling influence. He took his eyes away quickly and gazed idly at the garish murals on the walls. The pictures represented Nero and the Burning of Rome, and Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils.

Jackson downed his whiskey.

Behind him Jake Coronado said, "Well, I got other fish to fry, and I'll have to go home early. Shella's alone, and it ain't good for girls like her to be alone. I got to look after my livestock."

Jackson ordered another drink. When he had it before him, he said to Ellsworth, "Been any suspicious strangers in here today, Ellsworth?"

The gambler eyed him coldly and he flicked ashes on the bar and put his cigar back in his mouth. He spoke around it. "Horse thieves been active again? Or are you looking for a wanted owlhoot, Jackson?" He removed his cigar again and dropped it into a brass cuspidor. "I don't recollect of seein' any strangers, but there might've been one or two."

Jake Coronado turned quickly and looked at the marshal, but he did not say anything.

"A lady of refinement staying at the hotel, lost her jewels to a room-thief." Jackson studied the tips of his fingers. "We've got a lot of tough men in this community, men that would take the pennies off a deadman's eyes, but I don't know of any that likes to wear jewelry, do you?"

"Only Orville Sprawn," said the saloon-man. "Orville wears Indian beads. But he's dangerous with a gun, if he sees you first and knows you're hunting him."

The idea clicked in Jackson's mind that George Ellsworth had put his finger on the thief. Sprawn, for all he knew was the man who had plotted to steal the black horse, with Dellis. "Thanks, George,"

He had known of Dellis but he could not think of anyone with whom the dead man had associated except for Pansy; if she had escaped death she would have been able to solve the mystery. Jackson found himself deeply stirred by the girl's untimely end.

Who was the other end of the plot? He dismissed all thought of

Jake Coronado's implication in the matter, unless Jake was the one who had put the idea in Dellis' head and had offered him a good price for the horse in case the deal panned out. Jake was capable of things like that; he was smoother than he looked.

Another question that provoked Jackson's interest was the identity of the owner of the black steed. He decided not to make any more inquiries in the saloon and edged toward the batwings, content with the tip he had received from Ellsworth.

He lifted his hand in a salute to George Ellsworth, walked past Jake Coronado and Decker—who had moved toward the front of the room after the double killing—and stepped out upon the wooden walk.

* * *

THE FIGHT between Bob Dalton and Grat Coronado waged furiously, with Dalton having fought his way out of his dangerous position. He caught Coronado coming in. The blow that sent Grat Coronado staggering away from him was straight-arm, the left, and carried that shoulder power Bob had learned to drive into his licks. Squarely on the chin his reeling opponent caught a second streaking fist and was so dazed from the two blows he buckled at the knees, then ran around in a circle flailing the air, while Bob stood back and regarded him with a cynical grin on his mouth.

Coronado found himself and tore into Bob again. The latter might have finished the fight had he taken advantage of the interval when Grat was out on his feet. He met the rush of the other man, sidestepped and hurled his right hand into the pit of his opponent's stomach.

The pain that shocked through the man took his wind along with it. Grat lurched backwards, driven into a spin. He was still bent over when Bob reached his face with a smashing right and a crushing left, lifting the man out of his crouch and sending him to his knees. He lingered there, with both hands against the floor, shaking his head, blood dripping from his nose and mouth. He dislodged a tooth and spat it out on the boards; he tried to stand erect, went back on his knees and shook his head again, stayed on the floor until he had got his head clear. Bob was inclined to give his antagonist the boot, but didn't; he let Coronado alone until the latter lurched erect and squared off to meet him in a new attack. They fought toe to toe, less than three feet from Bess Queen.

The mouth of his opponent was a vivid scarlet slash in crimson-smeared flesh. It fascinated Bob, and the latter sparred for an opening, got it and crashed his right fist into that crimson and scarlet gash, saw the blood pencil out in a new stream he had opened. But the other man, instead of giving ground, brought himself erect and rearing on tip toes lifted an uppercut to Bob's chin, with considerable body weight in the blow.

Shock ran through Bob Dalton. The impact caused his brain to catapult off into space and he again hit the wall, the wind sawing out of his lungs. A black vortexing curtain shut everything out of his eyes, and an invisible devil sawed the top of his skull off just above the ears. He had a crazy idea that he was falling headlong into an ebony pit full of scalding water. A great labored effort to keep on breathing failed, then he got his breath and again began to strike back.

Ever since he had begun the long hunt for the murderer of his wife, Bob Dalton had contacted the tougher, rawer edges of life. He had battled and had become embattled, and a man learned to be ready to meet trouble and to give all he had to give, to protect his being. If it was any different, now the woman made it so; she was a savage, an Amazon with steel covering her heart.

Dalton's effort to overhaul the beast that had robbed him of his wife, and to punish and to kill him, had carried him along.

The unknown informant, who had tossed a letter wrapped around a stone through his window, hinted that the man he wanted was within

the hand-touch of Bess Queen...

For all he knew he was fighting the killer now; for all he knew he had the man there before him. Grat Coronado was capable of the worst crimes imaginable. The wicked little eyes of the giant revealed his true nature. They were red eyes now, redder than the red smear that coated his face.

DALTON'S strength was coming back, leaping back to him, it seemed. He had stayed on his feet, with shock running through him when Coronado's fist smashed into his chin; but how he had managed it was beyond his knowledge. His head was clearing; his defense, following the pattern of long experience in brawls of this kind, had kept him out of further danger. Subconsciously he had kept his fast hands working, his arms warding off those powerful though awkward blows which fell against his elbows and his shoulders with staggering impact.

He knew the desperado was not going to be easy to beat. Coronado had more than ordinary skill as a brawler.

Grat Coronado was trying to break his arms, not receiving any blows in return and not being able to sledge any licks through Dalton's guard. The latter knew his opponent was slowing up, that he was just about all in and would not be able to continue very long. Then Bob set to work on him. The redheaded woman saw, and in seeing, opened her jade green eyes to the indubitable truth. The courage, the dexterity, the ability to absorb punishment and still stand on his feet, were things she had now begun to admire in this man whose toughness and character she had tested in a furnace of her own design.

She was going closer to the fighters, step by step, inching forward, the small pistol in her hand forgotten.

The action of the renegade boss put new life in Bob Dalton. He appeared to spring up on the balls of his feet, to reach up and grab new strength out of the very air around him. Thus pushed and encouraged, Bob swung away; he circled his antagonist, found an opening, and stabbed his right fist hard against the man's bobbing head.

The slugging lick staggered Coronado and he dropped both hands. For the barest interval he was unguarded and helpless, and fireworks were exploding in his head; moving in swiftly, Dalton sent both hands hard into the pit of Coronado's belly. He stepped back as Grat fell forward, buckling at the knees, then slammed a right hook to the man's jaw. Coronado lay on the boards, bleeding, the red stain growing larger around his head. The bulk of him shook; his legs jerked and jiggled.

"That's enough, Dalton." The redhead edged forward; she had put the gun in the pocket of her skirt. "You have done enough to him. He fought you because I told him to. That's a ritual with him—he always obeys my commands. I don't want to be responsible for anything beyond what has already happened. I did not believe all the things I had heard about you, but you have just succeeded in convincing me of their truth. Your job is waiting. Come on over here to this bench and I'll doctor you up so you'll never know what you've been through."

He looked at her and the sweat rolled off his face and his body. Great noises were issuing from his chest; glistening prespiration mingled with the gleam of clotted blood around his mouth and his injured nose was giving him trouble. But it surprised him to find but small evidence in his face of the fight he had been through, after Bess Queen had attended his wounds and washed the blood away. The water bucket on the bench and the basin there, came in handy; she put a mirror in front of him and he nodded, quite satisfied with what she had done for him. She took a small pair of scissors and cut away a strip of flesh that hung down from his mouth where Coronado's brutal fist had landed several times. He winced and more sweat popped out on his face.

When those cut places caught the globules of sweat that curled over them the stinging was so prominent he almost cried out but he sat there, a broad-faced man with his emotions and his pain hidden from the jade green eyes of his nurse.

He was full of misery; his nerves were singing. They strummed in his head like taut banjo wires thumped constantly, without effort to make music, only crazy sound.

He walked stupidly and blindly behind her, and there was nothing clear in his head any more. But he had obeyed this woman without reluctance, the same as the beaten giant on the floor had obeyed her, not fully aware of her compelling influence. He only knew she had suggested something to him of a reasonable nature. Even when she had dipped the torn piece from her underskirt into the water and then tenderly found his wounds, he was not exactly cognizant of her power over him.

3

TOWN MARSHAL Jackson Coronado was in a bad frame of mind. For several weeks the band of horse thieves that had terrorized the farmers and ranchers over a long stretch of the past, had been lying still. They seemed to be biding their time for some reason, and Jackson knew this usually signified trouble. So well handled was this mysterious organization that it was apparently impossible to ferret them out. The marshal knew they head-quartered in Nebraska City, but they were so well protected it was as if they were not in town at all.

He had promised the Kansas City girl he would launch an investigation into the jewel robbery and he meant to keep his word to her.

He went over to the jail stable and got his pinto, let the horse walk down the street; he wanted to ride around and look things over. He sat slack in the saddle. Always there was that smarting, stinking dust in his face. Dust! He would never get away from it. He hated it. He rolled a cigarette and smoked it through ere he came within sight of the river and the garish lights of a steamboat that had docked at the levee.

He couldn't get the girl out of mind and when he saw her walking swiftly across the cobblestones, he urged his pinto into a fast gait. She smiled when he reined in and stared down at her, and said, "Why, hello, marshal. I didn't expect to see you again so soon. I—"

"Miss Stafford," Jackson said, thrusting the pistol butt first at her —the little gun he'd slipped into his pocket before leaving his office— and seeing her grasp it with a strange pallor spreading over her face, "You don't know when you'll need protection. Please keep this gun handy, and if anyone bothers you, shoot him without hesitation. I can't impress on your civilized mind just how dangerous it is for pretty girls to be alone and traveling in this country."

"Thanks for the compliment," she said and blushed. "Yes, I'm not afraid of guns and if I have to, rest sure I'll use this one. It was very thoughtful of you. I—I don't know what to say except that I'm not used to having anyone look after me."

He saw she was clad in a white muslin dress and that little diamond pin scintillated at the collar. The same pink parasol shielded her from the sun, but on her golden head was a bonnet of a different hue and shape and it was more becoming than the first one he had seen her wearing. Of course she wore a new hat each time she went out, advertising her merchandise. It was the smart thing to do; and he grinned, wondering how many hats she carried with her.

"I love the river," she explained. "I like to walk along the shore in the sunlight. But—you—"

"I rode down here to take a look at the boat." He removed his hat

and wiped sweat out of his eyes. It was hot and the wind was like a heated running iron. "I'll be seeing you. If you have occasion to need my services, just let me know. By the way —do you play cribbage?"

She laughed. "Indeed," she said quickly.

He lifted his hat and said, "We'll see if we can't work up a game or two of cribbage when there isn't anything to be done in the lawing business like finding your jewels. I'll be at the jail if it should become necessary to communicate with me."

JACKSON CORONADO rode away, thinking it strange he had allowed himself to fall in love with a girl he had known less than two hours. He urged his pinto into a faster pace and came to the alley behind the livery stable; he wanted to look in on the black horse. He reined in and sat his piebald, inspecting the side wall of the stable.

The marshal rolled a cigarette and smoked it and wondered about the black horse in the barn. Who owned him? Why was the horse the object of a plot like the one Varlene Stafford had overheard at the hotel? Slowly dismounting he let the reins trail and walked away from his piebald. He hoped to find the attendant but when he entered the barn he heard no sounds of the man. A boy in a big hat was digging fishworms in a pile of manure beside the door, but he vanished when he saw the lawman.

Lantern light caught him and he saw a sulky—a racing cart painted yellow with red wheels. Horses moved in their stalls. He advanced a step, becoming cautious for some reason he did not understand.

Jackson walked along the dirt floor, hoping to see a door in the partition that separated the stalls from the runway and the vehicle room. He was in the narrow aisle when he heard on the other side of the wall the furtive footfalls of a moving person. On his left was a waist-high rail that ran the full length of the aisle and over the rail he could see a stagecoach and another racing cart and a rubber-tired buggy. Harness and saddle gear was on every post in the barn. A second jonquil lantern burned brightly at the end of the barn, outside the office adjacent to the street. The foul smell of wet straw and horses filled the long narrow room.

There came a long wait, during which Jackson stood crouched against the partition wall, alert and listening. Then he saw the square oblong door that thrust itself out into the aisle, and knew the man on the stall side of the barn had left it open. But for all he knew, the other was a hostler and was tending the horses.

Then he saw the man come to the door. Coronado did not speak nor did the man up ahead. He was short, wide shouldered and covert. He wore a dark hat with a chin strap in place. His dusty shirt was dark, too, and spurs tinkled on his boots.

An uneasy feeling assailed the marshal. He stepped quickly away from the lantern light. Just when he was sure he had surprised the hostler at work, Coronado heard the metallic tick of a gun hammer being lifted. He flattened himself against the wall and pulled his own gun. He knew when the man levelled his Colt at him that he had been recognized. Gun flame lanced at him, and the staccato reports yammered against the silence of the barn.

Smoke swirled before Jackson's eyes, he saw the door swing shut, and it creaked loud and nervous on his ears. The hammer of his .44 rested on an empty cartridge and this did not help him any, because the man, having fired at him, was now in the stall behind the door and waiting for him.

Jackson heard a horse start threshing around; then other horses began to fiddle in their stalls. The chances were that his enemy would not show himself again.

Coronado decided on a bold move; if he stayed where he was the man in the other part of the stable would escape. His brain caught numerous impressions as each and every furtive sound was recorded, as he took two long steps toward the door. At any moment a slug might burn its way through the thin board wall. If

the other man was rattled, there was no telling what he would do. He suddenly reached out and yanked the door ajar. With his foot he pushed it the rest of the way open. Saffron lantern light made a mist around the opening. Still no gun was fired.

"I'm coming in after you," Jackson said. "If you want to surrender, you've got your chance." He waited, but his opponent in this bizarre duel did not answer. "Whoever you are," the marshal said bitterly, "you're playing everything on a single card. If it isn't high enough, you're going to lose, and it'll be the last time you'll ever lose at anything, mister."

Silence, unbroken save for the jiggling, fiddling horses. Jackson counted ten, heard no movement beyond the doorway, and tried to size up the layout, seeing a small aisle between two stalls and gloom curtains beyond this. He had to walk through that door if he got his man, and to step into that opening was to expose himself to the stalker. "Looks like he's out to get me," Jackson said, with a grim smile; "he surely must be playing for big stakes.

Straightening up, the lawman took his hat and slammed it through the doorway, heard it plop down against the stall on his left, toward the street. He heard the man in the shadows curse luridly and then a gun's purple-tipped flame streaked through the gloom at the end of the short aisle. Coldly and deliberately Jackson levelled his .44 and squeezed the trigger. The heavy gun banged in his fist and jumped, kicking against the heel of his hand. He pumped four bullets at the shifting, weaving silhouette in the dirty yellow light. He heard the scrape of the thief's body against wood; Jackson held his gun trained on the floundering object he could see in the gilding light of the lantern but he did not fire again.

The man's slanting shape showed Jackson that he was falling to the ground. His outflung arms made a cross on the wall. The striking body was enough—the fall could not have been faked. Coronado sighed and moved slowly through the aisle, scattering straw, and paused within four feet of the man on the floor. "How bad you hurt, Sprawn? Anything I can do for you?"

There was no answer. The victim's gun lay a-gleam in the straw litters, and Jackson could see the motionless, dead-looking hand six or seven inches away from it.

THE MARSHAL stomped on toward the immobile bulk on the straw and kneeling down, felt over the man's chest. He found the wound and the blood saturated shirt and he shuddered. Orville Sprawn's Indian beads around his neck and his wrists and his beaded watch-chain, were sufficent to identify him. But Jackson had already correctly guessed the thief's identification and he felt through his pockets. He was not surprised to find what he was looking for—a plush-lined jewel case. He had an idea now that Sprawn had been chosen by the leader of the horse-thieves to steal the black steed.

He got up and slid the jewel box inside his shirt. He was not exultant because he had killed a man; such things always left him a little sick, and a sadness of spirit enveloped him. His hands shook as he shaped up a smoke. Two men in one day...

There wasn't anything to be done now, except to see that Sprawn's body was sent home to his Indian wife. For a long time the squaw man had been a source of trouble to the peace officers of the county, and Jackson had had him in jail a dozen times. The man was so deeply involved in cheap devilment that Coronado discarded his previous theory about the renegade's being involved with the horse-thieves. If they had used him to steal the black horse they had done it only because if he was caught they would be in the clear. They could not be ferreted out through such a character, no matter if he talked his head off. Dellis had been the go-between.

Jackson Coronado suspected his relative, Jake, of being behind Sprawn's crude attempt to steal a horse in broad daylight from a livery stable located in the heart of the business district. Something about

the job suggested Jake; and if the latter were mixed up in it, sooner or later he would make another attempt to get the horse. Jake was a persistent reprobate; he wouldn't give up simply because one of his inexpensive hirelings had been killed.

Must be a good horse, Jackson thought, and he moved over to the first stall on his right and found a black stallion with beady eyes and a high proud spirit. The moment he reached out to touch the horse he saw the ripple of the smooth ebony coat and the way the head turned sharply to stare at him. There was everything in those eyes, Jackson thought, but there was not patience for a stranger. He quickly withdrew his hand and gliding to the head of the stall, spoke to the stallion: "You're a beauty, fellow. You resemble the horse described on the reward poster—Bob Dalton's black stallion. I wonder—"

Timidly, with a gentle touch in his hand he reached out to stroke the arrogant arched neck. A quiver went through the stallion but he did not give way to his wild impulses, and received the petting with an alertness and an air of putting up with something that he didn't enjoy, his ears cocked and his tail swishing unpleasantly in the marshal's face.

"You're a good horse, boy," Jackson said. "Anyone would appreciate a fellow like you. I figger, too, by looking at you the way I have, that a horse would have to travel faster than the wind to outrun you. I got a fast little horse but he couldn't keep up with you, boy. You must be awfully proud—"

He looked again at the prostrate form in the straw and then he sighed and marched away from the stallion; when he stepped through the door and stopped to peer back, he saw the horse watching him and there was now a more friendly light in the stallion's eyes.

The barn grew hot and steamy and he walked out of it, finally finding the attendant, who lolled on a bench in the shade of an awning. Coronado upbraided the man for leaving his work, told him to go back there at once and stay with the corpse of Orville Sprawn until he could send the undertaker's wagon to haul him home.

"That black stallion," Jackson said to the hostler, "who owns him?"

"Reckon the fella that rode him in town this mawnin'," was the answer. "A right sharp-lookin' fella, with black hair and eyes so keen they almost cut through you and leave your thinkin' wide open to him. He's about five eight or nine and kind of heavy, without bein' fat."

"All right," Jackson said, "you go on back and watch the horse. Don't let anyone fool around him. I'll see if I can find his owner. If the stallion disappears, Scott, I'll hold you personally responsible; they're tryin'to steal him."

"You mean them hoss rustlers?" Scott's mouth gaped open. He rubbed his stubble of beard and gave the marshal a strange look. "Do tell? If they bother me I'll shoot th' livin' daylights outa them. That's what I'll do, Jackson. You don't need to worry none about what I'll do—"

"You've never done anything as violent as that before," Jackson said, with an amused smile. "Mebbe in your old age you're gettin' over on th' right side of things. Did that fellow who owns the stallion look like a Missourian?"

Scott scratched his beard again. "Kind of foolish to ask me that, cause in my opinion they ain't no way to tell a Missourian from a Nebraskan. Jist how—?"

"They usually brag about it," Jackson said lightly, still grinning. "You come from Missouri, don't you? I've heard you say so a thousand times."

"They got something to brag about," Scott said peevishly. "You all ain't got nothin' to crow about if you come from Nebraska."

"There's another thing," Jackson said, relaxing in his good humor and enjoying Scott's company, "Missourian's are usually Democrats."

"Go along with you," Scott said. "What's wrong in bein' a Democrat? You folks in Nebraska ain't had but one good president— Abe Lincoln

and when he passed away the Republican party died with him."

Chuckling, Jackson walked on up the street toward the burial parlor. It was great to find relaxation when one's nerves were so tense one could hear them whanging like the strings on a harp.

Jackson had another reason for passing the time of day with Scott. The girl's face was in his mind, and it wasn't good to think so seriously of a woman you didn't even know beyond a chance speaking acquaintance. Shrugging, he walked straight toward the burial house, and from there he went to the hotel.

* * *

THE WOMAN with the red hair charmed Bob Dalton and sent his best resolutions scattering away from their mooring. He had heard enough about Bess Queen to know what she had done toward directing the activities of her wild bunch.

She walked ahead of him across the dusty hall to the office, without giving the unconscious Grat Coronado a second glance; she motioned to a chair beside her desk. She swung about and faced him and again he was arrested by the compelling beauty of her face. Even ice could burn, he thought; she folded her arms across her deep bosom as though aware for the first time of the importance of her figure.

"You are a hunted man," she said. "I know you're not safe here if you talk. The only thing to do is to keep your mouth shut. We've got a hard town marshal here, but he doesn't know what you look like, although there are posters on you pasted around Neb City in almost all the public places. But the reward poster does not give an accurate description of you. I have read them and know; I would not have recognized you. Your hair has some gray in it, but the poster does not mention the fact. More than a dozen men I can count have the same build and the same height and the same dark complexion."

He nodded and rolled a cigarette.

Bess Queen studied his face, then continued, "I can take you on, but you will have to obey my orders. The least rebellion on your part will get you nothing better than a piece of hot lead, probably in the back, if the boys find out who you are. Yes, when you stop listening to me you will be shot. I don't take anyone into my organization without first testing them; I have to know their qualifications and their limitations. Then I place you where you can do me the most good."

"Why did you subject me to that punishment?" Bob Dalton asked. "It seems you've got a rough way of dealing with men who want to go to work for you."

She smiled, but the smile barely touched her lips. "Usually the run of the men I receive here are fugitives, with Johnny law at their heels. I figure it's the best way to find out what I want to know about them. Their reactions to the beatings Grat gives them tell me more than words could possibly convey. Grat Coronado is the toughest man with his fists in town, Dalton. Or he was—until you arrived."

"How did you know my name?"

That uncanny smile again flirted with her lips. She dropped her arms and he could see the gentle rise and fall of her breasts, the shape of them outlined against the sheer material of her white shirt. She absently moved a stray wisp of amber hair away from her pale forehead. "I knew you were on your way here; you were followed the last thirty miles. I found out by your friend in Dodge that you were coming to see me about working for me. You were strongly recommended as one capable of running things in case I decide later to put you in complete charge of my business."

He nodded and shaped up another cigarette, studied the elegance of her, the stately shoulders and the shining splendor of her dark red hair. Not one wave of warmth had come from those lips, not one fleeting sign of a woman's sweetness had betrayed her. Yet he knew those qualities were there; he could see them through the frigid exterior, and he found something hungry, something deeply wistful and fervent and yearning, away

down in the depths of her jade green eyes.

"Jake Coronado's horse ranch is where we change brands on the livestock we pick up, but I don't want you to take an actual part in that; so as to be handy when I need you, I'll arrange for you to take over the town marshal's job as soon as they get him out of the way."

BOB DALTON folded his hands together and sat erect on his chair. "Do you mean you have arranged for his death?"

She nodded, studied the tips of her fingers and gazed solemnly into space. "He is to be removed," she said simply. "Perhaps it will take place today. I have influence at the city hall. The mayor is a personal friend. I can get you the job; my recommendation will be sufficent. That will keep the law hounds off you for a while. They won't expect to find the notorious Bob Dalton acting as marshal of a place as big as Neb City. And you can serve me better in that capacity than in any other I can drum up for you."

He thought: *A man's life doesn't mean anything to her.* Aloud he said: "How is it to be done? Is he to be shot in the back?"

"I suppose." She made a wry face. "What's the difference? He's in my way. Nothing is allowed to get in my way and stay there; he's dangerous."

"He's a Coronado," Bob said sharply. "Don't you have Coronados working for you?"

"They're not the same brand." She shrugged, was becoming displeased; he knew it was wise to drop the matter. He rose and looked down at her. Bess Queen's legs were crossed and one elbow rested behind her on the desk. Her mouth was curved into a thin, derisive smile, so thin it was barely there. "I'm giving them a chance and if they don't do it, I'll send you after Jackson Coronado. You'll start a quarrel with him, insult him and when he goes for his gun, you'll beat him to the draw and kill him. He is quick-tempered; he does not like to be called an old woman and chided about his fondness for stray dogs, and his habit of keeping them until he finds homes for them. He has a big pen in the back yard of the jail. Sodbusters and ranchers come in and get dogs from him; good sheep and cattle dogs are scarce and they want them. At one time he had a dozen flee-bitten dogs in his pen. He would kill a man quicker for mistreating a dog or a horse than he would for slapping him in the face. Jackson Coronado is a man with an independent mind; he is smart and a good hand with guns. But I have been told you are as fast as lightning. Since you've come along I have been thinking about a better way to get Jackson out of my hair."

"What about this Blaine Decker?" Bob's voice was sedate, full of curiosity. "He's fast, too."

"I don't want to have anything to do with Decker." she said. "Not right now. I think I'll hold him back to see how you come out. I'll use him for a hole card."

"Meaning you'll have him kill me if I fail you?"

"He's the only man at my command who could beat you with a gun, Dalton." Her voice was cold and matter-of-fact.

He got up and backed away from his chair. He did not tell her that he had a fondness for homeless dogs, too; that he loved horses. He did not tell her that she could count him out when it came to murder or killing jobs. Those things he would have to keep to himself.

He ignored the money Bess Queen produced from a tinbox on the desk. He was becoming deeply involved and he didn't like it. She looked at him closely when he shook his head and dropped the hand holding the money in her lap. There was no change in her expression that he could detect. But it was hard to tell what was going on behind that mask —a mask so pale and lovely he was influenced despite his steeled control. He wondered what this strange woman had that could ensnare a man of his nature.

"Bob," she said, and there was something silklike in her voice that he had not heard before, "you've got

to do what I tell you. I know best. The marshal is no friend of yours; he hates our kind. If he lives he'll put every last one of us in jail; he'll see we hang. Take this money. Get cleaned up and come back to me tonight. I shall be waiting here for you."

He thought about that and he took the money. "I want you to stay as you are now," he said, and his voice pulsated with that undefeatable desire that had started a fire in his veins. "I don't want you to change until I see you again—as you say—tonight."

4

MARSHAL Jackson Coronado left the burial parlor around three in the afternoon and the sun was still hot in the sky. It was still four hours until sundown and although he had much to do he did not neglect his horse, going back and leaving the hotel porch, without seeing the girl from Kansas City. He would see her later, he suddenly decided. He stabled his piebald and then washed up in the bedroom of the jail, making himself as presentable as he could without changing his attire.

He came to the hotel steps and loitered there while he sized up the lay of the land, and saw Blaine Decker and Jake Coronado talking in front of the burial house. They glanced nervously in his direction. Decker said something and Coronado nodded his head. For a long time—in fact since his early youth—Jackson had disliked his uncle. The man had never gotten along with his father, Joseph Coronado, a law representative as long back as Jackson could remember. His father had warned him never to trust either Jake or Grat Coronado, and to stay as far away from them as he could. *Lawful and lawless,* Jackson thought. *You can't play both sides of the road at the same time. Jump one way or the other, just be sure you jump.* Someday there wuld be a showdown.

The sun on the windows of the hotel was as pink as wild roses. A stray dog came out and followed the marshal up the steps and he spoke kindly to the fellow, telling him to go back. The dog looked wistfully at him, then wagged his tail and went back down the steps to the walk.

Jackson paused, tapered up a fresh cigarette, and glanced casually at the two men across the wide street. They were still watching him; Decker said something, and they both laughed. They then eyed the dog, and Jake nudged Decker and pointed at the black-and-tan hound. Decker moved slightly forward, but stopped as Jackson turned around and moved to the porch-edge and peered down at the dog. The animal had turned his head to look back at the lawman, then wagged his tail and crouched down and whined.

Lifting his voice, Jackson said: "You'll be all right, boy. I'll be back in a minute. Nobody will bother you—"

He heard Jake Coronado's jeering laughter and he stood with his legs wide-apart and his lean hands on his hips, staring directly at them. They did not speak again or make a sound and turned their eyes in another direction. The marshal could feel the tension his steady stare at them had created. He had meant for them to understand him, and his maneuver had left no room for doubt.

He passed through the flower-scented lobby and mounted a broad staircase that was covered with a Brussels carpet. As he passed the desk he saw a man leaning on the register, with a cigarette pasted to his lower lip and the wide strap of his hat resting against the cleft of his chin. He was the man Jackson Coronado had seen emerge from the *Mansion House* across the street, the short, wide-shouldered figure who had been covered with trail dust. Although the marshal paid him no heed, apparently, he thought he had

seen the face before. The stranger was a man anyone would notice in the street.

The newcomer wore a gun thonged down, low on his right thigh. A double-breasted dark shirt was open at the throat. A bruise showed on his left cheek and there were two slight cut places on his chin. Dust lay heavy in the material of his expensive shirt. He had long, heavily-lidded eyes. Very prominent were the deep lines past the corners of his stern mouth. But there was nothing unfriendly in the stranger's attitude.

The steps groaned under the marshal's weight. He crossed the landing, skirted a rain barrel that furnished water for the guests and stalked along to the K.C. girl's room. He looked at the numbers of the doors and located the right one. Varlene Stafford's blue eyes met his level gaze and a smile quickly traversed her face.

"I've got your jewels for you," he announced; "I guess you'll be glad to get them back."

Those light blue eyes flashed to the jewel case in his hand and then touched his face and breathed on it like fresh prairie wind; then, before he knew fully what she had done, her lips were being pressed soft, warm and moist, against his mouth.

She moved across the room, taking him with her, holding his hand, sat him down on a chair, went quickly to her bureau and brought a stone pitcher and a glass; she filled the glass with lemonade and she pressed this into his hand and said, "I hope you like this. I made it myself and it may be I got it too sweet."

He chuckled, so completely at peace with the universe that he gave himself entirely to this occasion. "I got the thief," he said slowly. "But I acted on a sly tip given me by a saloonman. What you said about the plan to steal the black horse came true, too. I reckon the way matters stand, you've become a sort of peace-officer of the community and I want to get a badge for you. Will you wear a badge if I insist. I don't mean out where folks can see it but where you'll have it in an emergency."

She laughed and bent over him and picked a paper flower out of a vase on the window sill and pinned it on his shirt. It was a red flower and made a vivid color against the somber woolen background. She nodded. The perfume of her hair was so pleasant he reached out and lifted a few strands of it and gazed at it in the sunlight that came through the window.

"I never saw anything look so much like real gold," he mumbled.

She laughed and the vigor of her and the spirit of her made the whole room respond to her moods. "First you arm me with a pistol," she said. "Then you want to give me a badge. The next thing I know you'll be wanting me to move over to the calaboose and help you keep house for the prisoners. Yes, I'll wear the badge, Mister Coronado. You are the best and about the only real friend I have in this town. I hope we'll always be friends, too; and if you need a woman to clean up your house or make your meals ready for your prisoners and even yourself, give me a try."

He stared at her, hardly believing his ears. He readily admitted the need of a woman at the jail. He didn't know when the house back of the lockup had been thoroughly cleaned; it was late spring now and usually women did their housecleaning at or slightly before this time of the year.

"Well," he said, somewhat embarrassed because of her offer and not quite believing she was serious, "I could use a lady over there, and—and— But aren't you having a little fun at my expense?"

"No," she said, "I mean it. You have been great in helping me, and I want to do something for you."

"When do you want to begin? How long do you want to work for me? How much salary—? But of course that doesn't count. I'll pay you well: you need not fret about wages. I have some money of my own and even if the county should object to paying the expense of a cook and housekeeper at the calaboose, I could at-

tend to that from my own bank account."

"Then I'm hired," she said. "I'll move over to the jail in the morning. I have this room paid for for tonight. You really do want me, Mr. Coronado?"

He wondered what she would do if he told her just how badly he did want her. However, he nodded, and backing away toward the door, said: "We'll have everything ready for you, and—and—"

She followed him to the door and stood close to him when he put his hat on and turned to go down the steps. She timidly touched him on the arm, and her voice throbbed with real happiness when she said: "I knew you wanted me. I wonder why the thought ever entered my mind of becoming your housekeeper?"

He could not answer her question.

They separated then, because Jackson Coronado had a great deal waiting his attention. In the first place he was going to see the widow of the man he had killed, see that she had groceries and money enough to take care of her immediate wants, and to see the kids had clothes to wear. He cautioned Verlene not to forget the gun he had given her for her protection and went down the steps, aware that she was watching him with that strange, winsome little smile on her lips.

* * *

AFTER going back to the hotel, brushing the dust out of his shirt and scrubbing his hands clean, Bob Dalton went downstairs, hoping to see the bright-faced blonde he had seen in the dining-room. He was not rewarded for his efforts, and paused at the desk where the clerk, a young man in dapper clothes and wearing black muttonchops, was sorting the mail.

"Anything there for Jess Timberlake?" Bob asked, using the alias by which he was known to his close friends around the country. "You spell it like you do Timber and like you do Lake."

The clerk's smile was a generous one. "My name's Creston Sturgis," he said with cordiality. "Just call me Creston. Before long I'll be so busy I won't have time to remember what my name is. Yes—there's a letter here for Jess Timberlake. I have never seen so much mail. I have got a hundred letters here and most of them are for people I never heard of. Here's yours, Mister Timberlake; it just came in. I swear we're going to have the house crammed full of guests if this big pile of mail is any criterion."

Bob had recovered somewhat from his fight with Grat Coronado, but his arms were still heavy and there was a dull ache between his shoulder blades. He opened the letter and read it, standing at the desk.

> Dear Pal—I'm going to tell you that I have found out for sure the man you're looking for is in Nebraska City. I am sure George Ellsworth, who operates the *Mansion House* there, can help you. George is a friend of mine, too; but he bears watching and to place your entire trust in him is to risk having your neck broken in a noose. I'd not advise crowding him for information. For certain reasons he might not want to tell you. I wrote him a letter awhile back, asking him to see that you were not molested while in his town. I did not tell him why you were going to pay Neb City a visit. Just watch George and if he tells you anything it will be due to his friendship for me.
>
> Your pal,
> Hugh Payne.
>
> P.S. If you tie in with Bess Queen you'll get yourself in a trap. Avoid her above all things, because once you get in with her, you leave yourself wide open to death. She wouldn't let any man escape alive if she couldn't run him, and I know your disposition....

Bob folded the letter and held a match to it. He let it burn and did not drop the letter into the cuspidor at his feet until the last white piece of paper had turned black; then he let the remnants fall from his fingers. They fluttered downward, charred and unreadable. His mouth tautened; knowing the clerk, Creston Sturgis, was watching him, Dalton forced a deceiving smile.

"Women are all alike," he said, "I wouldn't trust any of 'em. They can lie a man out of his life, but they're not going to get the chance to lie me into my grave. If a woman gets anything out of me, she's not going to get it by lying, by trying to make me believe I'm the only one."

"Nor me neither," said Creston Sturgis. "I've had my experiences, you can bet." He had poked the last letter into the alphabet box. Now he faced Bob Dalton and, planting his elbows on the desk, stroked his beard. "I've known some fast women in my time, friend, and some beautiful ones. One of the latter I saw here; she's a Neb City business woman—her name's Bess Queen. I swear I never saw a woman who could do so much to me simply by looking at me. I had always heard of her kind, but I never took much stock in the tales of those strange women until I saw Bess Queen. No sir; now I know."

Dalton was impressed, but he did not comment. He watched the young clerk who looked prematurely old because of his black beard and wondered if he, too, were a fugitive from the law.

A man's boots clomped across the walk and he came up the porch steps. But his shadow paused, long and grotesque, halfway to the door. Something had happened to attract his attention. Bob heard him speak kindly to a dog that evidently had followed him, then mumble something Bob didn't make out. When he stomped through the lobby a few minutes later, Dalton saw he was the lean, hawk-featured marshal.

The fugitive at the desk saw the strained look on the lawman's handsome face and the star on his shirt. Slowly Bob twisted round and watched the officer climb the staircase and then he drew his shoulders erect, remembering what Bess Queen had planned for the marshal of Nebraska City.

The outlaw sauntered out to the porch, stopped at the edge of the steps and hooked his thumbs in his shell belt, behind the heavy wide buckle. He looked up and down the street and saw vehicles moving along and kicking up a roll of dust. A prairie schooner and an empty stagecoach, and later on a buckboard, hove into view. Behind the buckboard was a cordon of mounted men, their saddle gear and their firearms rattling as they swept past; Bob moved on down the steps, with the dust thick in his face, and he stopped again at the curb of the boardwalk. He stood here and clasped his hands around a hitching post. A black-and-tan dog with long ears, his body lank and with cockle burrs in his fur, shuffled down off the curb, rubbing gently against Bob. In the dirt, his red mouth showed when he paused to snap at a fly that had lodged itself on his left hind leg. A man loitered in the street, dust ballooning around him, concealed him momentarily, then when Bob could see him again, he made out a six-gun in the man's hand. The latter was spraddle-legged, glowering at the dog.

The canine paid the man no heed and, having dislodged the bottle-fly, proceeded to make himself a bed, turning completely around several times.

BOB SAW Blaine Decker step forward. A clattering one-horse rig darted by and started the dust to ballooning again. The gunhawk waited until the dust had settled again, and then he made another sinister movement toward the unsuspecting animal. The sun shone on the long barrel of his gun; Bob saw he was left handed.

The street was empty now, and a strange golden placidity extended over the sun-bright thoroughfare. Decker advanced another stride. Remembering the renegade from his visit at Jake Coronado's horse ranch, Dalton knew the ominous capabilities of the roughian.

Then, with pity in his heart for the inoffensive dog, Dalton spoke, keeping his voice low and level; "Just a minute, friend! What has that dog ever done to you?"

Decker paused, and the gun lowered itself automatically; with his other hand Decker pushed his hat to the back of his head. His white teeth were visible when he drew is lips back in a snarl.

"Is he a pal of yours?" The gunfighter stood, leaning a little forward, and the sun made the gunbarrel a blinding dazzle.

"What do you think?" Bob's voice was calm. "Just reckon I hate to see things destroyed, like this hound that's probably a good dog and would be appreciated on somebody's farm. He's been living maybe three-four years, having a rough time eating and being pestered in hot weather by insects, and tormented in the winter by the cold. Just don't seem right he should be killed before he has had a chance to enjoy himself a little bit. What has he done to you that's wrong, friend?"

"I don't like dogs," Decker said. "I'm havin' myself a little sport. I don't get a chance every day to shoot a dog; there ain't none out where I come from."

"You mean those that walk on four legs," Bob countered sharply. "Where you come from they get along on two."

"Huh, if you ain't mindin' too much now, Mister, I'll go ahead and have my fun. I ain't one to mix up in other people's business, and I'm sort of impatient and get nervous when people try to mix up in mine."

Decker lifted the gun and, with his right hand he pushed his hat back down over his eyes.

Every thought in Bob Dalton's mind now concentrated itself on his task—the one he had appointed himself to serving.

"Whose funeral, Jake?" said a voice behind Bob. "Reckon it's goin' to be the stranger's. A man's crazy to go up against Blaine Decker! Figger somebody ought to tell this pilgrim—"

What happened then came in the curdling silence in which two men measured each other for shrouds.

A hoarse cry rushed up out of a man's throat. Close by a woman screamed and a baby began to cry against its mother's breast.

Bob Dalton was never quite sure of what happened in the fleeting second that followed the baby's bleating wail. The dust was kicked up in his face, and he was plunging forward, hurled into galvanic action by the great need for haste. Voices hung stubbornly around him... Then dust again, dry and choking obscuring. Dust with its sharp edge burning his face and again voices and the hard-held breathing of men...

* * *

BESS QUEEN had stepped outside the store and stalled along the galleried streets, past the Red Rose Millinery Shop. She had been aroused by the tale going around town that she stood in too well with George Ellsworth and was furnishing the money that banked his gaming tables. She had been feeling the ugly pressure of gossip for some time and had decided there was only one thing she could do. Ellsworth would have to leave town.

She had never thought much about the possibility of being found out. Her position had been made doubly sure by her lavish contributions to charity and by conducting a credit business that had made her a world of friends among the impoverished farmers. She was the only merchant who had been able to extend credit to the drought-stricken sodbusters the year before, and she had never dunned a single customer.

The money, of course, had come from her undercover enterprises. Her gang not only practiced cattle rustling and horse stealing, but some of her long riders had acted successfully as train and road agents. In the latter exploits she had invaded the territory of the James boys and upon those occasions she had arranged to make it appear that the Missouri outlaws were the perpetrators. Her ingenious management of her band of owlhoots had brought the wrath of the Missouri peace officers, including the governor of the state, to bear upon the renegades who got the name but not the game from those

holdups. In seeking retributive measures the James boys had shot up her scattered bands of less skilled fugitives, and had threatened to destroy her completely. In any event Jesse James had boldly stated in a letter to the Saint Joe newspaper that in his opinion there was one master brain behind the depredations for which the Missourians were being censored, and that he would not stop until he brought that erring person to a violent grave.

Bess stopped walking in the shadows of the galleries and walked across the street in the yellow dust; she had seen George Ellsworth leave the *Mansion,* heading for the bank. She stopped again, this time where the roads crossed and went in four directions. Bess got out of the sun, and in the awning's shade, felt for the Derringer she carried in her parasol, to make sure it was ready in case the gambler gave her trouble.

"What are you doing out in this dust?" Ellsworth was always polite to her. "Your complexion is the rage of the town; women envy you, Bess. Yet you risk your beauty—"

She said coldly. "George, I want to talk to you."

"Not here, Bess," he protested. "I'm thinking of your interest."

"They won't know but what this was a chance meeting," she insisted. "It won't take me long to tell you what I want you to do. The parting of the ways, like these roads cross and go in opposite directions, is hard upon us. You can select anyone of these roads and live to a ripe old age. I don't care which one you take. The debts you owe me I shall cancel and never consider you owing me anything. You have made a barrel of money here. But we are being connected by gossipers, and I can't run the risk of letting things get too far along. You pack up and get out; I'll pay you forty thousand for your interest in the properties we own together."

He shook his head. "Nothing doing, my dear Bess," he said adamantly. "You forget about the gossip. I like this town. It's one of the few places I've been lucky enough to find where I enjoy living. Now save your breath and run along, and let me stop that gossip. I have my methods and I'm sure they are not as dangerous as yours."

SHE GOT mad. She reached into the parasol and whisked out the little pistol. She palmed it and held it against him, and her voice grated when she said, "Do you want me to kill you? I am used to being obeyed. I have given you a chance to live and you reject it. I can have you shot down before you can reach the *Mansion—*"

He cut in, ignoring the gun, "By one of your back-shooting renegades? Let me tell you something: the James Boys are in town, and that means they're here for something besides the county fair tomorrow. The time is bad to pick a quarrel with me; you know that. For the first time I'm going to say *No* to one of your requests. I have always met you more than halfway, but I'm a gambler and I do a lot of bluffing myself. Now you get out of sight, or if not, let me alone. I'll see you later and we can settle this thing amicably. The James gang—"

Bess felt her nerves writhing in her flesh and turned pale. She had been too blunt with Ellsworth; she might have known he wouldn't scare. He had something on her. The James Boys! Standing there she had come closer to killing a man with her own hand than she had ever come in her life. She took the slack out of the trigger and heard her heart thudding in her ears; her breasts rose and fell with the raging fire he had built in her brain. He took a quick, backward step. He put up both hands before his face. She heard him say hoarsely in a low frightened voice, "Don't shoot me, Bess! I'll agree to what you say! Don't—!"

"You meet my representative at the *Mansion,*" she hissed. "I'll have your money there. You turn everything over to him. His name's Dalton. You'll know him. Tomorrow you be on the stage—any stage before night—and don't come back."

He kept backing away from her. He turned and thought it was safe, and stumbled through the dust. She had nothing but contempt for him. He was a low down yellow dog...

5

THERE CAME another flash of gunlight, and there sprang alive in Bob Dalton's hand a killing, throbbing instrument that hurled flame and roaring anger through gilded space. Bob's high heels came down hard on the walk and he slanted forward over the curb. The crackling of lead in the wooden post beside him came staccato on the first report on his own gun.

Dalton brought his .44 around in a slight lifting motion, his eyes straining through the smoke and dust. He weaved aside, then fired again, not waiting, knowing the other man wouldn't wait. He saw Decker's Colt make its sparkling flash, and the latter's slug also went into the post; Bob knew that the outline of the post as seen through the dense dust had deceived Decker. A volley of splinters showered Dalton. He was in a crouch when his third shot rang out, and the bullet lunged straight into the chest of the spraddle-legged figure.

It was a gripping spectacle to those in the wide, straight street. Bob Dalton's gunfire beat down Blaine Decker, reputedly the fastest man in town. When he threw himself out of his crouch and jumped ahead, leaving the curb, crimson blood was running out of the hole in Decker's throat. The left knee of the gunhawk's dungarees whipped raggedly in the wind. Bob's first shot had been low. Decker was on his knees and holding his Frontier model with both hands to steady it when he fired again.

A woman in an upper window of the hotel screamed as loud as she could. The leaping, purple-tipped flashes of gunfire punctured the dust curtain. Men were running now, and the horses in the street were prancing and rearing and their riders had all they could do to hold them in check. Somebody was driving a lumber wagon hell bent for leather down the middle of the street and the thunder of the heavy wheels dimmed the low death sounds that twisted their way out of Decker's mouth. He tried to lift himself off his hands and knees, then fell into a flat sprawl, with arms stretched far out and legs spraddled as far as they would go away from each other. He lay there, a testimonial to his young adversary's gun-skill. Those who looked on with disbelieving eyes, gaped and uttered words as incoherent as words can be when the brain is grappling with the stupendous weight of the incredible.

Bob Dalton calmly lifted his gun and pushed the smoke out of the long barrel with his breath, pressing his lips against the muzzle as if the Frontier model .44 were a horn to be blown, and he was in the act of poking the Colt back into his holster when a man on a horse who had ridden up, peered down at him and said, "Kid, that was good gunplay and I want to congratulate you. I happen to be a lover of dogs, myself. I never tried to kill one, and I've never made it a practice to let anyone else shoot a dog in my presence. I don't suppose you remember me, so I'll just confidentially tell you. I'm Frank James. My brother's right behind me, and we plan to spend the night in Neb City."

Bob did not give way to his pent-up emotions. Later on, he knew his nervous reaction to this happening which had lasted less than twenty seconds, would take its toll. It always collected afterward, but right now he had his mind clear and was thinking of what the stranger on the dun horse had said. He was still there, in the slight, expensive saddle, his cowboots hooked in his tarnished stir-

rups and he was leaning down, so Bob could see the genuine friendship etched in the thin, hawk features. The slender horseman wore a long mustache, drooped at the ends. Not much of his mouth was visible. It was as if the mustache was meant to hide a bad scar. His eyes were deep set and unwavering, and his nose prominent. Bob slowly reached up and clasped the man's strong hand and they stood there a minute, looking at each other, with the hound dog that had caused all the trouble pushing up against Bob's leg in an affectionate gesture.

"Thanks," Bob said. "I remember you, Frank. Tell Jesse hello. If I can be of help to you, let me know. I live at this hotel."

Frank James turned his dun horse around and headed back for the little cavalcade that awaited him beyond the shadows of the hotel lamps.

BOB HEARD a man striding vigorously toward him. He peered up and down the wide street and people scurried in all directions, and women jerked children along by their hands, eager to get out of sight so as not to be seen as former spectators to a bloody gunbattle. People were like that, Bob thought; always wanting to get in on something sensational, but lacking the fortitude to be seen doing it.

The falsefronts were like crouching prehistoric mammals, waiting to devour the winner of the recent combat, and their windows were red, sullen eyes, the doors that gaped open, saffron hued and red tipped tongue. They seemed to crowd in on Bob Dalton, low, squat like toy buildings set up in a child's play room, and the sky, with the yellow and blue gauze moon, seemed so high the buildings below seemed smaller. Dalton stood up straight, turned and looked at the man who briskly approached him from the hotel steps. The dog was still with his benefactor and gave every evidence that he meant to stay with him. Maybe the black-and-tan hound understood what had happened, and why he was alive now instead of being a smear on the street's thick dust carpet.

The town marshal said to Dalton: "Thanks, pal, for saving my dog; and thanks for saving me the trouble and the danger of having to go up against Blaine Decker myself. I guess you know you have just killed a man who bore a fabulous reputation as a gunfighter?"

"Yes, so I have heard." Bob's voice was cold, lacked the warmth of Jackson Coronado's friendly speech.

"I reckon, too, you know what that makes you in this town?" The marshal was studying his face, intently but not without cordial interest.

Bob nodded.

"It simply means that from this day on, as long as you live, you'll have to risk your life protecting the fame that has made you the most outstanding gunfighter in this section of the country. There will be those who'll come along, with envy in their hearts and the raw courage to back up their desire to see you killed. You'll have to battle your way through these self-appointed, potential executioners, and it's not going to be easy. But allow me to be the first to shake hands with a man who faced death against a professional gun wizard to protect the life of a black-and-tan dog."

Bob didn't know then that he was being silently idolized by those folk who were honest and upright, and who would build his name into a legend. They had seen something they would never see again. They might see gun battles galore; they might see duels between two natural-born shroud makers, but they would never see a man risk his life to save a dog's. And when people are touched in tender places by such events, they do something about it.

Dalton shook hands with Jackson Coronado, unaware of his importance at the moment. Things become legends and slip into legendary niches where they stay, without the creators of those things knowing much about it. They never live long enough to taste the victory that they have

wrested from an exacting world of losers; and if they did live, then the legends would perish, for it seems that legendary fame loves only those who no longer live.

Jackson Coronado turned to wave at a face that peered down from him at an upstairs window and Bob slowly sauntered across the walk toward the hotel. The dog stuck to him until the marshal said, lowering his head and gazing at the gunfighter: "You'd better let me take your new friend over to the calaboose and put him in the pen where he'll be safe with some other dogs I'm holding to get homes for."

"That's all right with me," Dalton told him.

There was nothing to be seen in the level gaze of the Neb City marshal save a warm friendliness.

* * *

BOB DALTON crossed the hotel's fancy lobby and climbed the carpeted stairway. He was getting nervous now; he had just lived through one of the steepest hazards a man can face. He knew it wasn't over—this danger that faced him—there was never anything else but danger lurking ahead for him; but somehow he had a strange feeling about the future. A man couldn't always win; there was a time when he'd have to lose.

He wondered what Bess Queen's reaction would be; Bob had deliberately upset the apple wagon, so to speak. From now on Bess Queen would not be easy to get along with.

Every time the road turned now it would take him closer to the end of his journey. He felt definitely he was getting closer to the man he hunted. His quarry would cross his path. He was so sure of this he had begun to plan with careful attention to details the way he would collect in full for the girl sleeping under the willows. It had a pattern so strange and so unbelievably a part of him that it came with natural sequence. How he had met the Coronados and the part they would play in this chapter—this final chapter of his book—and how he had met Jackson Coronado, all seemed to fall into the niches that formed a complete picture. There was no doubt in his mind any more.

He passed the rain barrel and paused just beyond this to shape up a cigarette. A girl was standing in the door of her room, and her saffron hair was down on her shoulders; her eyes were wide and full of sharp interest as she surveyed him. He ignored her at first, looking at his cigarette until he had stuck the smoke into his mouth and lit it; then he tipped his hat to the back of his head and turning, slowly walked back to the water holder.

On a bench against the wall was a pitcher and a glass, and he helped himself to a drink. The water was warm, had a nasty taste but he set the glass down empty. He touched his shoulders against the wall, and peering at her, said, "It's awfully hot and dusty outside."

She nodded, apparently companionable; he knew she was the dream he had seen enter the dining room. She had impressed him so deeply then, he wondered why it was she didn't have the same power now. She said softly, "I saw what happened from the window. You surely must be all right as a man, or you wouldn't have gone through that gunfight for a dog. I am glad you won. But it must be awfully hard on anyone to kill another person—"

She didn't get her words straight but he knew what she meant.

"It's awful, yes, and it takes a long time to shut it out of your mind. I don't know that it can ever be forgotten. I have talked to others who have had the same experience and they say it can't be left behind you like something you don't have any use for any more. I'm shaking all over. I'm scared, really, ma'am."

"You're very pale," she said. "Please step into my room here a minute. What I have seen of you tells me you're a decent sort and we don't have many of those men left out in this country. I don't mean all men are bad, I mean sometimes

the young ones are crazy and reckless. But—well, do you know what I mean?"

He wasn't sure he did, but he slowly entered the bedroom and took the glass of lemonade she handed him. "I wish I had something stronger than that," she said gently. "Maybe you need a drink of whiskey."

"No, that wouldn't help as much as this," he said. "I appreciate your kindness—"

She had stepped over to the front window and was gazing down into the street. "They're just removing the body," she said over her shoulder. "Two men; one of them's the undertaker, I guess. Now there's four others helping the two, and they're putting the body on a door. There's a crowd there, still, and they're all nervous and excited and some of them are talking. I can't hear what they say."

"Well," he said putting the glass on the stand table, "folks always go overboard on things like that. In time they'll forget all about the shooting and settle down, and maybe in ten, fifteen years they'll mention it when somebody tries to find something to connect with the town that outdoes the other fellow's story. But —well, thanks a lot, ma'am. I sure feel better."

He edged away toward the door and she left the window and came to the center of the room. She gazed at him a moment and then, with an audible sigh, exclaimed, "And it all happened over a dog—a black and brown coon hound. I've see hundreds of them in Missouri, and they go begging. It wasn't the dog's value, however, was it? You didn't really want the dog? It was more your instinct to protect the unfortunate. I believe that must be part of your nature."

HE STOOD in the door, with his hat in his hand and peered at her from lowered brows. He thought her eyes were very bright, her face sweet, and he wondered who would be the lucky fellow to win her devotion. A woman of that kind never gave her heart but once, and the first to get it would always keep it.

"Well, I'll be running along," he said. "It has been a real pleasure to meet you, although I don't know what your name is. I guess it doesn't matter; we're just a couple of straws in the wind and happened to have been blown across each other's path for a short interval; the wind's going to blow us away again."

"I like the way you talk," she said. "I'll tell you my name. You must have crowded a great deal of living into the twenty eight or thirty years you've been in this world. My name is Verlene Stafford. What's yours?"

He hesitated and then quickly he answered her, brushing at the dust in his shirt front. "I'm Timberlake. You don't have to think of any other name, just Timberlake. Thanks for telling me your name. I like it. I shall always remember how kind you were to me in my trouble. Now I'll say adios." He lifted his hand in a salute; she saluted him back and her eyes smiled at him. His head spun as he walked away, going down the full length of the hall without realizing he had passed his room. He came to himself with a start, and turning back, walked to his door and fitted the key to the lock. Just then a sound of footsteps in the hall caused him to glance up sharply and he saw a short, black-clad man, with a heavy shell belt outside his short coat, stop at the door of the room he had just left. A badge gleamed on the lapel of the short man's coat. It was gold and reflected the lamplight; Dalton knew the man was a United States marshal.

Bob Dalton entered his bedroom and shucked his dusty clothes. He bathed in the washbowl, doing the best he could to remove the dust and grime caked on his skin; the wind and the heat and the ordeal of the duel had left him nearly exhausted. Besides, he had a grave fear that he was being stalked by that unknown hidden enemy, not Bess Queen's rider who had trailed him so long, but by the hand of the law.

He thought of it as a dead hand that was always reaching out and groping for him. Sight of the U. S. officer in Verlene Stafford's room had jolted him to a full realization of his predicament.

6

MARSHAL Jackson Coronado climbed aboard his piebald and headed out of town. It was four-thirty and the sun had lost some of its shimmer. Soon Nebraska City lay behind him, with its covert eyes. He had put the black and tan dog in the corral in the rear of the calaboose, and had left Bill Crow, the bewhiskered stage driver in complete charge. He knew the mission upon which he was bent was a precarious one and caution rode with him.

Beyond the city limits the marshal was out of his jurisdiction, and if anything happened to him now he would have no authority to fall back on.

Nebraska City dwindled to a remnant of scattered houses and an occasional windmill. This was definitely horse country and the wide, level fields were dotted with various breeds.

A mile and a half from Nebraska City was the first apple orchard, a small one, but significant of more to come. Jackson crossed a narrow wagon-bridge and came to a road that went west and turned into this, going toward the motionless blue horizon. Over there, squatting indolently in the valley, was a log cabin; a mailbox fastened to a hickory post bore the name Coronado.

Further west another smaller road ran north and south and Jackson knew a branch of this road stole across Jake Coronado's horse ranch and ended in his barn lot. He knew the topography of this country by heart.

The marshal sat slack in the leather, but his glance missed none of the features of this fragrant valley. Nor did his glance miss the four men who sat their horses, grouped together like some defensive unit, on the left side of the little road.

It took Jackson Coronado five minutes to reach them, and he saw that one of the riders was the man with the drooping mustache who had spoken to Timberlake after the latter had killed Blaine Decker. The man wore a box style coat, black as jet, and a gray derby tipped down on his head to shield his intense gaze. Then he saw a man, much smaller, with round shoulders and a little flat hat on his head, wearing brown whiskers, whose small intense blue eyes were clamped upon his face. They resembled horse traders and the marshal did not worry about them. The two other men were big, clean and frank eyes and rode good horses.

JACKSON slowed his piebald to a walk. He lifted his right hand in a friendly salute, and the four riders acknowledged the etiquette of the road. None of them looked at him suspiciously; all returned his spirit of friendliness. He drew rein, reached for his tobacco and papers, and said, "Nice day for stayin' in the shade. Shade is good if you can find it and keep goin' at the same time."

The smaller, round-shouldered one said with a reserved sociability: "Yes, sir, it's plenty warm. We're buying livestock and don't know much about this country. Is that the Coronado horse ranch over there?"

"That's it," Jackson said, twisting and lighting his cigarette. "You men smoke?" He extended his tobacco and papers.

"No, thanks," said the tall man with the mustache. "We're taking in your county fair tomorrow; they say it's a great institution."

"One of the oldest in the state,"

Jackson said "Come far?"

"Missouri," said the bearded man.

"Long ride from here," Jackson commented. "I've been to Saint Joe, but never beyond that. It's a pretty good town. Got a lot of steamboat traffic which we have here, too, being we're on the river."

"As good as anywhere else," said the tall mustached rider. "You'll have a big crowd tomorrow, I'll bet."

"We usually do," Jackson said, drawing deeply on his smoke. "You figger on looking over Jake Coronado's live stock. He's always got a supply of blooded horses worth seeing. He's quite a race horse promoter too; takes his running horses around quite a bit."

The tall man said, "We buy blooded stock. My brother and I have a farm near Excelsor Springs. We never pass up anything good if we can buy it at a reasonable figure."

"You'll find Jake's stuff interesting. He knows horses." Jackson tautened his reins and reared back in his saddle to look behind him. There was nobody in the road except the five of them. "Well I hope you have good luck in this county with your buying. Hope to see you again."

He urged his piebald away from the group, feeling he had met two very interesting personalities. It was a part of his years of training to observe men and their habits and he had gleaned a lot from such contacts as this one in the broad. He did not look back.

It was almost sundown when he reached Jake Coronado's horse ranch. He could see it from the slight ridge where he had stopped his pinto. He glanced down at the trail but there was no sign of the four men he had met in the road, not even a balloon of dust. This did not bother him, however. The only thing that left him puzzled was the sharp way in which the riders had eyed him all the time he was with them, as though they figured he might draw a gun or something.

Before him was a blue line of timber, with the sky overhead flamboyant like soft pastel colors smeared on a canvas. The valley's floor was level as far as he could see across Coronado's ranch. He made out a bunch of twenty horses in a fenced pasture, grazing, four hundred yards off south from the squat rambling cabin.

Jackson followed the lane going toward the house. A deeper silence had set in. He saw the cabin sagged in the middle; the timber of which the house was formed was weather-dryed and stained. But the small windows were clean and calico curtains embellished them.

Jackson Coronado had never stepped foot inside his relative's house and even now he had no intentions of paying them a visit—that is, in the accepted fashion.

But he changed his mind and rode up to the rickety front porch and dismounted. Grass sprouted between the warped planks of the floor. He tiptoed across the porch and reached the open door. The floor was clean, had been scrubbed until it was bone-white, and everything in the room before him was fresh and tidy. A huge fireplace stood in the wall facing him. A ladder ran up one wall of the room to a low loft. There was a hole in the ceiling at the top of the ladder.

Without warning, footsteps cracked on the boards above, and a girl's face appeared surreptitiously in the opening over his head. She had a very pretty face. Seeing him, the girl recoiled with a sharp intake of breath and the startlement changed the expression of her eyes. Curiosity vanished, however, and in its wake came deep and shocking fright, and in this moment her red lips hung open on her white, moist teeth.

Jackson Coronado had never seen so much fear written into a girl's face.

* * *

BOB DALTON went to his room, washed up, and returned to the street. As he walked past the girl's

bedroom he saw the door was shut, but he heard a man's low hoarse voice. There was something dramatic in the hush and in the tone of the voice.

Night was not far distant; the wind already had become cooler. The lamps of the *Mansion* made a jonquil path halfway across the wide dusty street.

Bob crossed the street and entered the *Mansion* house. Two men a-sprawl on their chairs at a card-table, looked up; a sodbuster and a cowboy and a drummer stood at the long bar, drinking, without saying anything to each other. The cowboy's red shirt threw a garish patch on the back-bar mirror; elsewhere in the spacious room men and spangled women moved about idly, and an occasional voice spoke into the gloom of stillness.

The bartender saw Bob's lifted finger and pushed a bottle and a glass across the counter. Bob had his drink and stood there, hearing a footfall and a spur jingle behind him.

Presently, from down at the back end of the bar George Ellsworth said: "Everybody drink up; we're having one on the house."

Bob turned. One of the men at the card-table had risen and stepped forward. He was short and hard-fleshed, dressed in black serge pants and a white shirt open at the throat. He wore a frontier model .38 in a gem-ornamented holster thonged down to his right thigh. A heavy gold signet ring flashed on his left hand and his black hair was cut close to his head. His eyes were almost a white-grey. There was a settled look in them, but the bland face was not interesting.

The man said: "My name's Joe Barnes. I've been hearing a lot about the fine horses you've got in this country. I'm in the market for some good blooded stock."

Bob's nerves jerked because he knew this man was the U. S. marshal he had seen enter the Kansas City girl's room, and because Joe Barnes was looking direct at him. He had heard of Barnes. The officer had a bad name, was swift with his gun. There was something else that distinguished Barnes as a marshal—it was an amazing memory. Bob was compelled to shake hands with him. This reminded the fugitive he couldn't stay forever in Neb City.

"I'm glad to meet you, Barnes," he said. Then he lowered his head and downed his drink. The lawman had placed both huge short fingered hands on the bar. His profile showed a smooth, cunning look.

The lawman took his drink, moved away from the bar. The person who had moved behind Bob, tapped the latter on the shoulder. Bob turned slowly, halfway around. Jake Coronado was thrusting his very broad face forward.

"I want you to come out to my house tonight." Coronado's voice was low. Nobody heard it but the man he addressed. "If you don't, you won't be safe here tomorrow." Aloud he said: "Say, mister, how about that black stallion you ride? Is he for sale? I might make you a better offer than anyone else in here, better than Mister Barnes. I like black horses, them that are as swift as your Black Lightning, or whatever it is you call him. Everybody knows I pay good prices for the horses I buy."

Bob saw new life spring into the U. S. man's eyes. He shook his head at Jake Coronado and said, "No, my horse is not for sale. I wouldn't part with him and you'll save your time and mine if you don't fetch the matter up again."

Coronado frowned. "Shucks," he said. "What kind of a fella are you? I might go as high as a thousand dollars. You couldn't turn that price down. If you did, there would be something wrong with your head. Say I do make that offer? I'd like to have your black stallion to race at the Neb City fair. I'd have a chance to cop the prize money. Of course it wouldn't be worth a thousand, but I'd just like mighty well

to own a horse like your Lightning, mister."

"My name's Timberlake," Bob said. He shook his head again. "Not five thousand—not anything would buy my horse. As I said a moment ago, let the matter rest. I'm not a horse trader; I neither buy nor sell. I'm a cowhand and I'm looking for work."

Jake Coronado said peevishly: "Bet you're from Missouri."

"What makes you think so?" Bob said quickly.

"Only a Missourian could turn down an offer like mine," Coronado said. "I don't know why it is but all Missourians are stubborn, like the mules they produce in that state."

Bob merely laughed, caught Jake Coronado's sly wink and turned back to the bar. The conversation ended there. But there was one thing Bob knew for sure—the U. S. marshal had not missed the part about Black Ebony, and this, as he well knew, was a dangerous point that, through Coronado's ignorance, had augmented the odds against him.

MOVING down the room, Bob paused at the side of George Ellsworth. "What's doing in your line?" he asked softly, aware that Barnes could not catch anything he said in a low voice to the gambler. "Is Jake Coronado trying to tip my hand to the lawdawg?"

"Jake is capable of anything treacherous," said Ellsworth. "If he could get your stallion by getting you into Barnes' grasp, it would please him immensely. You've got to keep one eye on Jake, and both eyes on the U. S. marshal. Besides, the two thousand reward wouldn't be hard to take and the way that back-stabbing horse thief figures, as much money as that is worth sticking his head out of his hole to get."

"I'll watch him," Bob said. "Have you heard anything I should know about, Ellsworth?"

"The James boys are in town," said the gambler, lighting up a fresh cigar. "If I were you I'd hide out a while. Not that the James boys want you; I hear they're your friends. But Barnes is on your trail, and once he finds out you're Bob Dalton, all hell will bust loose. He has been watching Bess Queen's mercantile and he might have seen you come out of the place—who knows? The least little blunder now, my boy, and they'll nail your hide on a drying board."

Bob risked a long shot. "You staying with me?" he asked.

"You know I am," Ellsworth said. "I'm the only man in town you can depend on. Jackson Coronado is tough. He hates his kinfolks, and he hates wanted men. He hates Joe Barnes, too; they had some trouble a long while back, and Jackson isn't the kind to take a rotten deal without fighting back. Barnes worked him out of a big reward for an Indian road agent wanted by Uncle Sam."

Bob's face went into its inscrutable mold. He felt he had said enough and had listened to enough, and not being too curious about how George Ellsworth had been so positive of his identification when he had met him in front of Bess Queen's general store, he decided to let it drop where it was. He ordered a drink, downed it and left a dollar on the bar. He sauntered toward the street door, not looking at Barnes who, he knew, was looking at him.

Jake Coronado was still at the bar and had not said anything to him as he walked between the renegade and the lawman. Cool air struck his face and he waded the dust across the street to the store, glanced back at the saloon but saw no sign of Joe Barnes and quickly stepped inside the big room. He did not stop but walked swiftly back to the partition and through the hall till he reached the office door. He knocked on this and heard Bess Queen say softly: "Come in, Dalton. I'm alone!"

TWENTY minutes before Bob Dalton entered Queen's presence she had been housed with Grat Coronado. She had placed her steady eyes on the renegade's face and had seen the cold sweat beaded on his

upper lip. She crossed the big candle-lighted stock room and sat down on a wooden box. One of the candles had burned out. The ghostly beams from the other taper revealed the strong outline of her face.

"The girl has to die so we'll be safe," she said. "There's no need of trying to convince me she's not a threat to us. Your brother has been so dumb that he has allowed her to find out too much. She wouldn't stand hitched if the law—Joe Barnes for instance—started working on her. She would talk, and squeal loud. There's no telling when Barnes will start prying into my business. You go out there and fix her so she can't talk, and you do it right away. I've had a strange feeling all day we're sliding into serious trouble. If you get a faint heart just remember one thing—she can hang every one of us."

He stood there, a man with a brutal visage, but not unhandsome in a way. "What're you going to do with the man from Missouri—Bob Dalton? He's as dangerous as the girl out there at Jake's. The kid ain't nothin' to me; I'd just as leave stop her clock as look at her, only it don't seem fair to let the Missourian have so much lee-way."

"I'm not watching him too close." She brushed a tendril of copper red hair away from her eyes. "I can use him when I need him; he'll be ready to serve me. But today he did something that I can't let go unnoticed. He'll pay dearly for the mistake of acting without my orders. I'm thinking of a way to punish him right now. It was, however, Decker's fault—making all that show in the street just hoping Jackson Coronado would hear about him killing the dog and start gunning for him. Decker had too much confidence in his gun talents."

A note of awe and admiration crept into the woman's voice. True, she had done a lot of thinking on this subject and, despite her efforts to control her emotions, she had found it impossible to condemn Dalton. He had miraculously aroused something deep within her that she hated to admit was there.

Grat Coronado was observing the changing expression of her face. She knew he was puzzled, and there was danger of letting this man, upon whom she depended for so much, slip away from her clutches. She wanted to maintain the same iron control of him she had always had; it didn't matter what it cost her.

He said: "I want to shoot his heart out when the time comes. I've got a personal matter to settle with him."

She raised her right hand to her chin and held it there, gazing at Coronado with her brows lifted. She was alluringly beautiful, there in the shadows.

"You've got my instructions, Grat," she said. "You go out to Jake's, while he's in town getting drunk and get rid of that girl. Don't leave anything to show it was you. Women have been destroyed before by marauders; you know how to make it look good, so they won't think to look for you when they start the manhunt."

7

SUNLIGHT came through the cabin door and Jackson Coronado's badge of authority gleamed. One of summer's hottest days had begun to lose its intense, cruel heat. The marshal removed his hat and smiled at the girl; she grinned back at him.

She said: "I guess I was a little scared; I thought Grat Coronado had come back." She got her legs through the hole, and stood, facing Jackson, with one hand clamped on a round of the ladder.

He nodded, failing to understand what she meant and waiting for her to explain. She studied him with a

sober interest, and her mouth underwent a change of expression. "I should tell you why I was frightened," she said. "My Uncle Grat came here awhile ago to kill me. I hid up there in the loft with this gun; I held it levelled at him and, when he saw he couldn't get to me, he went away."

"Why does he want to kill you?" Jackson asked, staring through the doorway and listening to the sounds in the forest. "What makes him feel that way about you?"

"He's a Coronado," she said simply. "One of the wrongside Coronados. We never did get along; he hates me because I'm not one of his kind. I don't know what my name is; Jake rescued me from some Indians. Jake warned me not to trust Grat."

"I know you're not a Coronado," Jackson said. "So Jake warned you against Grat?"

But this did not explain to the marshal why Grat wanted to kill her. Jackson was puzzled, and impatient.

"Grat is a terrible person," she said. "He suspects me all the time of trying to get him in trouble. He often gets mad at me and once he told me if I ever told anything on them, told about all the horses they fetch here, he would cut my throat from ear to ear. He pulled a knife, too, and showed me the edge of it."

All the fear and startlement hadn't left her eyes.

Jackson Coronado read the girl and found her as interesting as a good book. He didn't hurry her; he let her talk. Long ago the country had been invaded by horse thieves; since then such a band of renegades had made Otoe County their stamping grounds. Lack of cooperation from official sources had kept Jackson's hands tied; but the marshal was not without his suspicions.

The marshal knew he was beyond his jurisdiction. His authority had ended at the county line; but Sheriff Len Lucas was a figurehead who balked every attempt made by respectables to apprehend the renegades. Whether Lucas was being paid off by the head of the band, or whether he was just plainly reluctant to endanger himself, the marshal had not yet decided.

There was one thing sure—if he uncovered sufficient proof of the Coronado's implication in the horse stealing he would go directly to the Federal authorities at Lincoln.

The girl went out into the kitchen, and when she returned she carried a coffee-pot and a tin cup. Hot liquid on a hot day was better than any cold drink, Jackson figured and he helped himself, sitting down at the table and waiting for the girl to go on with what he knew she had in mind.

Looking at him directly, with her back to the fireplace, she said: "I want to leave here, and I think you should leave here. You're in danger; if they find you in this house they'll kill you if they can. There was a young man here this morning on a black stallion—a Missourian—and Uncle Jake is afraid of him. He thinks the man is playing a part and is not what he is supposed to be. Grat is mean, and he'll kill us both if he comes back here and finds you and me together."

Jackson shaped up a cigarette, lit it, and smoked thoughtfully a moment. He gave the girl an understanding glance. "Are they in any kind of trouble?" he asked, with no great urging in his voice. "Have they done anything to break the law? You don't have to talk unless you want to, Shella."

She came forward and stood above him. "If I told you anything and they found it out, Grat would surely keep his word and cut my throat from ear to ear. I am afraid to talk."

He set his tincup down. He drew a long breath. "The man who stopped here this morning was Timberlake; the black stallion explains that much. Was your uncle nervous when Timberlake came here?"

Shella was not certain what she should do. She stalled, her face stern for one so young. "I think Jake was nervous," she said softly. "But I

don't know for sure."

He nodded, arose, took her arm and walked to the front door. "Horse-thieves, aren't they?" he said flatly but gently. "They are nothing but horse stealers. They belong to the mysterious band of Black Hoods, and they fetch their stolen livestock out here to use the running iron on them. That's it—isn't it, Shella?"

She pulled away from him and covered her face with her hands. "Yes, yes," she moaned. "You've guessed it. Grat thinks I know too much; he came out here a little while ago to kill me. Please—what shall I do?"

He walked out into the yard and looked for signs of flying dust, saw none. Pacified, he said: "I'm going out to look at the horses they've got corraled. You get ready to go into town with me. I'll take care of you, Shella; you'll be all right."

She was silent. Her hand came up and touched him and dropped. He moved slowly away from her and walked around the corner of the cabin toward the unpainted outbuildings.

* * *

THE U.S. MARSHAL, Joe Barnes, called at the county jail to see Sheriff Len Lucas. The latter was a fat man, weighing well over two hundred and fifty pounds, fifty two inches around the waist, six-two in his heel-less carpet slippers and bald as George Ellsworth. He had a special-made chair, which rested on the plank sidewalk outside the jail. No loafer was brazen enough to use the chair for fear of arousing Len's fury; he had a voice deeper than a foghorn, a lashing tongue and no guts. He traveled via wagon or buggy; usually his spring wagon conveyance stood hitched in front of the stone-and-log jail. Brutal as he was, though, he never wished his weight upon a horse.

The U.S. man had a bundle of reward posters.

WANTED! DEAD OR ALIVE
ROBERT J. DALTON.

ONE OF THE WORST OUTLAWS AT LARGE

HEIGHT 5 FEET, 8-INCHES; WEIGHT ONE-SEVENTY; BLACK HAIR; GRAY EYES.

REPUTED TO BE MOST DANGEROUS FUGITIVE FROM JUSTICE... FAST AND DEADLY WITH HIS GUNS...ACT WITH CAUTION.

NOTIFY U.S. MARSHAL JOE BARNES AT LINCOLN.

TIP: WATCH FOR THIS MAN WHO WILL BE RIDING A COAL BLACK STALLION.

The fleshy sheriff cast a weather-eye upon Barnes as the latter spread the reward posters out on the sheriff's desk. Lucas fumbled around in his tent-size vest until he found a cigar, and lit it. They walked out upon the sidewalk and sat down.

"I reckon you figger this Dalton to be headed my way," Lucas said, spreading his blue handkerchief over his hairless dome. "Reckon you got a reason to believe he's headed for Nebraska City. He just wants to do me a favor and toss a load of reward cash in my lap, is that it? He shorely must have a very kind and sweet disposition—"

The fat man's voice was edged with sarcasm as he studied the details of the poster. "Howsomeever," he added, "You figger to get me and a whole lot of other innocent folks killed. There ain't no man living can take Bob Dalton, and you know it, Barnes."

"I can take him," Joe Barnes said in a placid tone. The marshal never spoke in a loud voice, no matter what happened to provoke him. "You spot him and I'll do the rest. I've got two good reasons for believing he's in Neb. City or will be. One is the county fair that opens tomorrow; the other reason has to do with the band of horse thieves you've got operating right under the tip of your nose called the Black Hoods. They're the talk of the frontier; everybody knows how they've pulled the wool over your eyes for better'n two years, Len. It's an established fact they're making Otoe County their

headquarters. You're the laughing stock of every law-enforcement agency between Kansas and Texas. If Dalton comes here, he'll probably join up with the horse thieves. If you've got any suspicions about where they might be, you've just as good as got that reward in your jeans."

"If I knew that," maintained the fleshy officer, "you allow I'd rest until I slammed the cooler door on them? What kind of a sheriff you think I am, Mister?"

"Well, I don't want to hurt your feelings," Barnes said.

Lucas glowered at him. "Why kill Dalton? I thought he was one owlhoot who had never killed anybody. Ain't that his reputation?"

"You see what this placard says," pointed out Joe Barnes. "Although he never kills, even in a tight place, but merely wounds his opponents—being able to throw his slugs with such accuracy he can put a bullet in a man where it won't damage him much, he's a hoss thief and such have to hang. The penalty for taking horses that don't belong to you is death, Lucas; you know damned good and well it's a capital offense."

The minion of justice pawed his florid face with a fist as big as a pie-plate. "Funny Uncle Sam got around to thinking that way," he said.

The U.S. marshal shrugged his shoulders; his eyes mirrored contempt for his companion.

"We had a killing in town today," Lucas said; "man named Timberlake blasted down Blaine Decker, driftin' Texan, a hoss wrangler. Never saw no fancier shootin'. Swift as light Timberlake pulled his gun. Decker was a fearsome fellow, known to be a gunhawk, and he had his iron in his hand. But blamed if Timberlake didn't cut him down. He hip-shot Decker before the other man could swing his gun around on him. This Timberlake—"

"Could be Bob Dalton," Barnes interposed quietly. "That's one of two things I've got to find out about before I leave here. A minute ago you said Bob Dalton never killed anyone; well, that isn't true. He shot a federal lawman a month ago in Saint Joe when the latter accosted him in a saloon called the *Buffalo*. The marshal died; that, I reckon, puts the noose or a bullet closer to our fugitive. He probably doesn't know he has a murder charge against him. He has lived a strange career. I don't know of another road agent with the same peculiar record."

"Just an accident that he's wanted for murder." The big man's face was beaded with sweat. "Otherwise he's not as bad as your reward posters make out. Do you always have to exaggerate them things?"

"To arouse public interest, yes," was the cold rejoinder. "*Dead or alive!* Sounds business-like and will get results, let's hope. Strange tale that, about how's he's looking for the hombre that murdered his wife. Figgers the Owlhoot will produce the killer. A man has to be crazy to sacrifice his life for a minute of revenge."

Sheriff Len Lucas grunted dispiritedly. "Mebbe. I don't know. I won't say. Just mebbe—"

BOB DALTON'S mind was far away when he stopped at the door after waiting to be invited in; when he heard Bess Queen's voice, which was soft and calm—very calm, he wrenched at the knob and stepped through the opening. He knew he was allowing himself to be drawn into a network of subtlety. He felt himself shaken; beautiful images of her had tortured him for the past hour.

"You said tonight." His voice was hoarse, deep-throated with emotion. "Nothing could have kept me away from you tonight; I guess you've done something to me—"

"I can't look twice at a man without doing something to him," she said. She raised her arms and dropped the black shirt over her head. He had caught her dressing and she was not embarrassed. She unbuckled the belt of her Levi's and tucked her shirt inside, looking not at him but at the task that occupied

her. "I want you to go with me," she added quickly. "We'll be alone on the road. We'll have to ride fast. There's a human life at stake; we'll have to hurry. Go to the barn and get your horse and meet me at the blacksmith shop. Don't let anyone follow you."

"Where are we going?" He stood straight, with his hands behind him on the doorknob. He heard little bells ringing in his ears.

Grave concern touched her face. She stepped swiftly past him and took a shell belt and holstered gun down from a nail. She buckled it around her waist.

"It's a long story and I don't have time to tell you now. We can talk about it when we get away from town. Hurry now; I'll be waiting for you."

He almost ran. Less than five minutes later found him aboard King and approaching the ebony shadows that enveloped the small blacksmith shop. He remembered he had ridden by the place on his way into town that day. It seemed a week ago, but he knew it had been only a few hours.

She came out of the gloom on a horse as black as King. He did not see her until the steel shoes of her mount rang on the pebbled ground.

"Let's go," she said; "I've got the fastest horse I could find."

A moment later he said, "You've got a good horse." Their elbows touched and the stars twinkled so close to them Bob felt he could reach them with his hands; he could get a handful of stars.

"Grat Coronado went home an hour ago to murder his niece; he thinks she has been talking. We've got to reach him in time to prevent the murder—"

He thought suddenly: *She means the girl I saw out there—Shella! She got the water for me and told me about herself and about Jake Coronado.* Something curled the raw edges of his nerves against each other. He had known all along he would see that girl again. The fear that they might reach the horse-spread too late wrought havoc. "Come on," he said; "we'll have to do better than we're doing now. Let your horse out lady—"

* * *

WHEN TOWN Marshal Jackson Coronado walked away from the cabin he took a quick look-see for danger; so far as the eye could observe there was no trouble lurking in the concealment of the brush around the house. He was cautious when he entered the dark-stable. Already fireflies flitted about lighting their little lanterns. He came to the door of the enormous flat-roofed barn and paused. He tried to peer into the darkness of the interior. He heard horses and caught the stench of wet straw and manure and made a wry face as he stepped carefully into the areaway in front of the stalls.

Heat came suddenly into his face, sticking countless needles through his skin. He moved agilely away from the door and circled the open space, pausing again, this time at the entrance to the saddle room. Old leather and dust assailed his nostrils. He stood, poised in alertness, sensing that he was being watched and not quite sure what action to take.

He flattened himself against the board wall. Here he waited, holding his breath as much as possible, with a tight sensation in his throat. He had just inched his right foot forward when a flying object struck him in the back and knocked him to his hands and knees.

A split second later a man grasped him around the neck and pulled back on him, with a knee finding the small of his back. He felt his wind being held in his throat. The gleam of an abruptly uncovered lantern fell on the straw littered dirt floor and sharp gravel pierced his bare palms.

He was dragged to his feet and, when he tried to wheel away, his antagonist let go of him. The force of his effort carried him violently into a bark-clothed post and he saw a constellation of rainbow colored stars pirouette off into space. Something exploded behind his eyes!

8

BOB DALTON felt he had wronged himself and felt miserable about it. When a man failed himself he had nothing left. A furtive air hung over the fugitive, and fear of what lay before him drove hard into his consciousness. He was afraid to face it, yet knew he had to face it. But he did not pity himself.

"She was made for me," he said. "Damn the world. I'll not let her get away from me. What I do, I do with my eyes open."

Bob felt King lunge forward, and the woman's smaller steed broke into a run, too. He had to pull King in a little so Bess could keep up with him, but her black mare was faster than an ordinary mount.

She rode close to him, with the silver star shine in her face.

"I am very sorry for her," Bess Queen flung at him. "Grat is a tough man; he thinks he has to kill her to protect me. But he won't be in a hurry about doing it. We've simply got to get there, Bob, before—before!"

"Come on then," he shouted irritably. "Spur that mare or you'll be left a mile behind."

They bumped over a clattering wagon bridge and the cracking echoes were similar to the roar of a big cannon. They came closer to the stars as they raced over a ridge, and then the sky pulled itself away as they ran toward the bottom of the hill. He was a length ahead of her when they crossed another bridge with the smell of water hanging over it. Up another ridge, and now she was riding close against him and their legs pressed together.

Bob shouted around at her, "I'm going to leave you. I'll get there twenty minutes before you do, and twenty minutes may mean the difference between life and death to that kid. You'll be all right."

"Go ahead, Bob," she answered, speaking into the tearing wind. "You kill Grat Coronado on sight! Don't give him a chance to kill you!"

He rode away from her with her voice crying over and over again, "You kill him—"

The way Shella Coronado had looked at him in the cabin, with fear in her eyes and her generous soft mouth trembling was a picture that tortured his brain.

* * *

MOONLIGHT gilded the cabin and the deepening night's silence was broken only by the song of locusts and the whinny of horses; and the moonlight filtered through the open door of the log structure. Golden radiance made patches on the unsubstantial porch. There was something else the moonlight did, too. It ferreted out a pale, blood-stained face on the floor—

Bob Dalton muttered a low curse as he stumbled over a decayed log, almost fell when thrown off balance; he quickly righted himself. He finally achieved the porch and he inched across the complaining boards that sunk under his weight. He stepped across the door-line and stood, breathing softly, a flattened outline on the wall.

He saw the crumpled body and there was the odor of blood in the room. His heart whipped up its savage beating while he lighted a bracket lamp he found beside the door.

Shella Coronado was dead!

Bob thought: *"She was a good kid. It seems funny she can't talk to me, that she can't smile and that the fear in her eyes isn't there any more."*

Once before, a long time ago, Bob Dalton had found a woman like this. His moment of intense, indescribably suffering accomplished something for him that he had been incapable of realizing before. It stopped the heat in his blood and it throttled the passion that had tortured him for the past hour.

Not even violin strings could be tightened into such tension as this

moment without breaking. The haunted, hunted and completely miserable Bob Dalton slowly lifted his head and peered into the calm, collected gaze of Jackson Coronado, the Nebraska City marshal!

The two men did not exchange a word. Jackson Coronado did not know that Bob Dalton was innocent of the crime; Bob knew it, but he could not tell the marshal. The situation—a deceitful, ironical situation—absolutely stunned him; it stunned the lawman, too.

Caught in the trap fate had prepared for him, this man who already was a fugitive, had to submit to the authority of the other. He lifted his hands shoulder high and the marshal ordered him cryptically to turn around. Then Jackson Coronado removed Dalton's gun from the holster on his heavy shell belt.

"I am surprised, of course, to find you here like this. It's seldom you find a man who stands up and outshoots a professional gunslick like Decker, involved in a brutal murder such as this one, Timberlake. The two somehow just don't go together. But I walk up here to the door and see you bending over the corpse of a woman whose blood is still warm. Your face is pale and there is a terrible look in your eyes. I reckon there's nothing for me to do but to accept what your actions imply. Get yourself over to that table and sit down. If you've got any guns hidden about you, it will be wise not to try to produce them. I may not be as fast as you are but it's a cinch that I have the upper hand, and I don't aim for things to get out from under my control."

Bob Dalton, blown by the winds of chance into an ordeal that left him as helpless as shackles of steel would have bound him, gave the taller man a tolerant nod. He couldn't hide a raw irritation, though; the smarting fact was the way he had allowed himself to be shoved into this trap by Bess Queen.

If I had let her alone, he thought: *if I hadn't made a play for her, I would be all right now.*

MARSHAL CORONADO sat down facing him, astraddle of a chair. He had put Bob's Colt on the table and the latter could see the gun glinting in the lamplight. But the weapon was too far away for him to reach.

"You're in a rough spot," said Jackson Coronado. "When I found your black stallion out there lather on him showed he had been hard put to it. I have never seen a horse like him. He is a superb mount, I admit. The girl is dead and there's nothing we can do to bring her back around again. When you jumped me in the stable and hit me on the head, why didn't you kill me? You had your chance then. Or did you think that you had done me in and would be safe?"

Night sounds came into the room, the owl, the crickets and the sly, furtive jackals crept about and the eerie disturbances struck around the two men; there was the weird chorus of frogs in the creek below the cabin, to deepen the solemn effect.

"I don't suppose I could convince you that I did not kill her." Bob's voice was low and sincere and husky. "It would be impossible to make you believe the last thing I would think of doing would be something like this awful thing. Once, a long time ago, I experienced a tragedy similar to this—in fact it so closely resembled this happening, that sight of the girl lying dead in that unspeakable state almost killed me. The same thing happened to my wife. I—" His voice broke as grief surged through him again.

Jackson Coronado looked at him sharply, with a strange vivid brilliance in his eyes. "Go on and talk," he said. "I don't see any reason why you shouldn't; you've got my interest." The marshal continued, then, to watch the other occupant of the cabin, his gaze never leaving his prisoner's face.

But Bob made it a brief story and ended with: "I came out here to see Jake Coronado who wants to buy my horse. He approached me in the saloon on the matter, George Ells-

worth's saloon. However I didn't know that I would run into anything like this." He shrugged his broad shoulders. "I stepped into the trap—if it was a trap for me. I did not jump you in the stable; I did not know you were anywhere around when I came out here. It's just one of those things fate does to a man. I'm in it and I can't get out of it, and I don't figger on trying to make you any trouble."

Jackson Coronado got up suddenly and pushed his chair back out of the way. "It's an amazing thing," he said coldly, "but I believe you. You're not the kind to do a thing of this kind. There's your gun; let's get out of here. It won't do any good to stay here any longer. Jake Coronado is not coming home tonight, nor is Grat; one of them has already been here. If I were guessing I'd say it was Grat. But I have got to find out for certain. There can't be any guesswork about it. I think this girl was killed to shut her up. Whoever did it reasoned she had too much on him, and he killed her to seal her lips."

It was hard for Bob Dalton to believe the marshal had liberated him. What had befallen him this night was the turning point or the climax-point, in his long hunt. The dead girl had been wearing a breast-pin; he had taken it and put it in his pocket, because seeing it had numbed his mind. It was instinct that had made him take it—his wife's breast-pin. That and a short piece of rope with a slip-knot in it; the two objects clinched the whole thing.

He recovered his gun, and there was no eagerness in the way he picked it up. Jackson was watching him from the doorway. "Let's ride," the marshal said. "Be careful when you follow me outside. We don't know who is hiding and waiting out there to take a shot at us."

Bob felt an inner, deeper glow. Coronado had turned his back and was walking away from him; stronger testimony of his trust could not have been found in the most eloquent words a man could speak. A warm feeling of friendship for the lawman reached out and seized Bob in an unbreakable grasp.

They did not speak as they emerged into the cool of the night, with the nocturnal sounds hitting around them with more sharpness.

9

AROUND seven o'clock Marshal Jackson Coronado let Bob Dalton go to his hotel, satisfied that the latter was not the murderer of the girl in the lonely cabin. Bob walked down the street; he traveled without haste, and when he reached the hotel he climbed the porch steps leisurely and without impatience. He found George Ellsworth waiting for him in the lobby. The gambler removed his plug hat, smoothed out the wrinkles in his white vest and suggested they go upstairs so they could talk in the privacy of Bob's room.

"What I've got to say won't keep you long, Timberlake," Ellsworth said.

Bob nodded and they clumped up the stairs. Unlocking the door, the man who was a fugitive with a price on his head, led his visitor inside. He closed the door.

Ellsworth lit a cigar and stood at the window peering out across the lamplit street. When he turned around slowly, Bob saw little gleams of sweat on his face. But as usual the face was expressionless, with a good deal of fire in the eyes.

"I have information for you that may save your life," Ellsworth said. "Bess Queen plans to get you out of the way; she does not trust you. She is afraid Joe Barnes, the U.S. Marshal is on her trail. If she hasn't tried something of the kind already, I'll miss my guess. You are probably being stalked. If I were you I'd leave town. She'll be picked up and then you can come back. I'm going out of my way to help you, although I don't

know why, because your way of life is not my way, if you know what I mean. Not insinuating anything, you know."

Bob thought quickly, was not impressed because he had gone through all that in his mind, and so he said casually, "Have you seen Grat Coronado?"

Ellsworth shot a swift glance at him, chewed on his cigar a minute. "Why?"

"I merely asked," Bob said, hiding his real interest. "The fellow has a way of getting under my skin and I don't like it. I plan to tell him off, so he'll stay out of my business. It doesn't matter a great deal; when I'm ready I'll find him."

Ellsworth peered strangely at him and a slow smile inched across his face. "I think I know what you mean." He moved toward the door, "If you've got the guts to stay here, you might be all right—that is if you get Bess Queen out of your hair. The only way I know to do that is to—"

He ran his hand across his throat and made a dry, clucking sound. "It's a damn cinch as long as she lives you'll be in danger; she'll keep trying until she gets you."

Bob halted him with a question and the man swung round angrily, "Is there any reason she worries you? Mebbe you'd like to see her removed this way—" He mocked Ellsworth's gesture of a moment ago, running the edge of his hand across his jugular vein.

"You imply—well, you're not very grateful, are you?" the gambler stuck his cigar back in his mouth. "I try to help you and you insult me. Oh, I know what you mean. Yes, sure, I'd like to see her dead and in hell; what's the need of lying about how I feel? But I don't think you'll do anything to her. You're just plain woman-soft, Mister. S'long."

The door opened and closed and Bob Dalton found himself alone.

He waited until he was sure the gambler had left the hotel, he then washed, combed his hair, and calmly walked out of the room. He had two things in mind, and both were grim, ugly things. The crowd was still arriving for the opening of the fair, and Nebraska City would be jammed to the last false-front. Tomorrow would be too late to execute the plan that was blue-printed on his brain. He looked back over the long trail that had led him to the zenith of his hunt for a man, and it didn't seem possible for him to be so close to the end.

* * *

JACKSON CORONADO crossed the street in the direction of the Mansion. He saw George Ellsworth leave the hotel and the yellow lamp burning in what he had ascertained was Timberlake's room. He felt strangely uneasy; something was going to snap and he knew when it snapped it would bring havoc to the community.

Coming up even with the alley this side of the saloon, the marshal paused and looked around him. He saw the same four men on horses he had met in the road near Coronado's horse ranch, and they were riding slowly toward him. There was a covert air about them and his uneasiness was deepened by their sudden and furtive appearance. The man in the flat hat, who rode slightly in advance of the others who came down the street abreast of each other, lifted his hand and called out, "Hello, Marshal. Where is there a good lodging house?

Jackson indicated the hotel: "Best place in town to rest if you're tired. Good beds and mighty reasonable rates. But you'd better hurry; they are beginning to fill 'er up. The county fair is going to be a big deal."

The four came up to the curb and halted their mounts; Jackson could feel the cold steel of their eyes.

"We'll check in and then put up our horses," said the man in the flat hat. "If you see any livestock men around and they've got good horses they want to sell, tell them we'll be at the hotel."

"What name shall they ask for?" The marshal tapered up a cigarette and the match flare showed the stern lines in his face.

"Jack Jonk and Fred Alderman," said the blue-eyed horseman. "We'll be glad to talk to anyone you send around our way. Thanks, and we'll probably see you at the fair tomorrow."

The marshal lifted his hand in a friendly salute and watched the mounted cordon ride away. They whirled their steeds and walked them through the dense dust to the hotel's hitchrack, and dismounting, tied them there. Jackson saw them climb the porch steps and enter the yellow-lit lobby. Then he turned back toward the *Mansion*, his sense of distrust of these men deepening as time passed.

But he had other things to do—he had to capture a wanton killer, and thoughts of the crime at the Coronado horse ranch made him sick. He had never seen such a brutally treated and murdered person as the girl who, only a short while before her death, had expressed a fear of Grat Coronado; this settled any question in his mind regarding the culprit's identity. He would find Grat Coronado and when he did, if the man wouldn't go to jail peacefully—Jackson was sure he wouldn't—then he would kill Grat in his tracks.

He stayed at the saloon only long enough to find out the man he wanted wasn't there, then slowly left the establishment. He had seen George Ellsworth come down the wide staircase from his office and the gambler's attitude showed worry and nervousness, despite his schooled habit of remaining composed.

The street was busy with pedestrians now, and more vehicles were moving in, throwing up a screen of choking dust. Covered wagons and buckboards and a buggy with the top down holding two women, and a stagecoach that rumbled in behind the procession, held him up at the cross roads.

He reached the opposite side of the thoroughfare and paused in front of the bank. He discarded his cigarette and watched the spray of sparks; then he moved on again, grim and resolute, keeping to the task he had set for himself.

* * *

WALKING briskly, Bob Dalton halted in front of Queen's General Store. He was cautious and anger burned him into an impatience such as he had seldom experienced. He gripped the short piece of rope in his pocket and sweat stood on his broad, strong face. He knew what he was going to do with the rope.

Presence of his beloved wife's breastpin on the girl's corpse had settled all doubt as to the identity of the murderer of the woman whose death had cast a perpetual shadow over his mind. The same man had destroyed both women; and that he was so close to the end of his long, exacting search seemed impossible. But the breastpin and the rope assured him that it was no fantasy.

He turned suddenly and crossed the stoop to the door. A dim, jonquil lamp burned against the far-off partition of the store. When he hesitated, with his hand on the doorknob, he heard the sounds of a trail and river town that had been awakened by revelers of night life. Horses ran through the wide street; vehicles rattled by. Men shouted and men sang, hurling their discordant voices against the moon and the sparkling stars. Travelers continued to gather for the county fair.

Bob tried the door and found it unlocked. He walked straight back to the partition and he went through the door there, into the little corridor. Bess Queen had heard him come in; she stood tall and straight against the saffron lamps, in the entrance to her office. Bob's slight smile pressed his mouth into a slight curve. He began to feel his old excitement when in her company reasserting itself.

"I'm looking for Grat Coronado," he said; "I got there too late and the girl was dead!"

She was breathing hard and she was pale. She nodded, lowering her eyes. She backed into the room and stood by the desk. She looked down at her hands, and he watched her so

sharply he did not miss the flush that stole over her face. She lifted her head and gave him a swift, covert glance and turned away, going to the wall beyond the desk. The door was still open.

Bob swung about to close the door. He waited then, staring at her across the room. He saw no friendship in her motionless expression. He did not move again for a moment, and he met her measuring glance. He read the disturbance in her eyes, then he slowly went to her and placed his left hand gently upon her shoulder.

She did not shake his hand away, nor did she flinch from him. Finally he caught her with his free hand and tenderly drew her to him, locking both hands at the small of her back. He surprised himself by letting his lips find hers; when she did not resist him, he swept her close up against him and held her there. He could feel her heart beating. It was like a small clock against his chest.

"Women like you," he said hoarsely, "were made to be kind and soft and to accept love. I can feel your power and you can feel mine, and we are being moved by the current of the river of life."

She was willing to surrender to him. Her lips were like hot red coals of fire, and she breathed against his throat with the blinding response of an overwrought woman.

It was a long time in minutes before she aroused herself and pushed away from him. Her palms were on his chest and she was shoving against him, and her breathing had become slower and more regular.

He could not see that her eyes were darker now and more narrow and her lips had become dry and still. She had no trouble in getting away from him. Something colder and more unfeeling jumped into her face. She had allowed herself to be conquered, but she was not the kind to stay conquered. She shook her head several times as if trying to dislodge the drug of passion from her mind. She backed up against the desk, standing on unsteady legs. He did not reach his arms out to her again. What had happened, Dalton knew, would never happen again.

"ALL RIGHT," he said. "I guess we're starting off again as strangers. I rode off and left you. Grat Coronado had already been there. I figger you saw me in the marshal's custody and did not show yourself. I can understand that. But —where will I find Coronado?"

She rubbed a hand across her forehead, tucked in the edges of her copper-colored hair which in the lamplight seemed red as a flame. She adjusted her shirt—a man's shirt. There was no happiness about her. Light and shade painted shadows on her face. Her lips moved, moistless, dry looking lips. She spoke something, but her words were indistinct whispers of sound. There was nothing going on where he could see. The warmth and softness of her that he had felt a moment ago were not there now. She stood, barely breathing.

"I don't want you to get killed," she said. She repeated it. Her husky voice touched him. He knew what she meant to imply, but he did not believe her eyes; they held a lie. She covered them with a quick droop of the lids. She seemed to sense that he did not believe her. "You ride out of town and don't come back."

It were as though she were offering a reprieve, or a stay of execution.

"No," he said. "I'm not leaving Nebraska City. That's final and will be as I have planned it." Then a thought quickly flashed into his mind. He was not missing anything. He walked around a chair and stood with his hands clasping the back of it, and he craned his head a little forward. "Are you trying to shield Grat?"

She did not answer but a fleeting glimpse of the contempt she had for Coronado was visible in those strange, stony eyes. "He might kill you," she added vigorously. "He is fast with his gun, too, and a coward with it. He won't shoot you while you're standing up face to face with him,

he thinks it is the only way out. He has been afraid of you all along; I don't know why."

He was motionless, his thumbs were hooked behind the buckle of his belt, not satisfied with her explanation. A woman would talk like that who was protecting a man.

Bess Queen, watching his face intently, read the misery there. She came across the room to him, touched him and moved with him out of the room, out through the corridor. She led him with taciturn gravity to the front door. They stopped in the gloom of the smelly store room where drygoods and groceries blended their odors. Her voice fell low.

"You're safe only because Grat Coronado wants the money I've got for him. Look up on the roof of the hotel. See him standing there in the moonlight? See the rifle in his hands? He could have killed you when you came in here; from that position he commands the situation. That's why I said a moment ago you might be killed. If you start after him now you will be killed as sure as you're standing here with me."

Bob remained without speaking over a lengthy period, his body stiffly erect. He peered into the dusty night, quiet and tense. He heard her voice again and there was the heaviness of sorrow in the tone.

"I don't know why I should be trying to save you. But that's what I'm doing. Your past is a mystery to me. There is something in it you can't help; you have allowed it to warp and twist you into a strange creature, half inhuman. Men do many things that women do not understand. You baffle me. There is one thing, however—today the U. S. Marshal put placards all over town. There is a large reward offered for you, dead or alive. Joe Barnes is the most dangerous peace officer in the west. You—"

"I am not afraid," he told her. The sincerity of his words spoke of what was in his being. He knew he was not afraid of anything now.

"That is a foolish thing to say." She caught her breath and her face went a little pale. "Life is too good to throw away. Once I could have killed you; I could have driven you into a death trap. In fact, I wanted to put you where you would be out of my way. But all that changed back there while you held me in your arms. You came to me as a lover—the only one I have ever really had. I want you to go away from here, where you will be safe and can live in peace. Maybe some day I'll find you—"

She drew away from him then and was stopped by his voice. "I reckon you mean that, Bess," he said. "You have figured out a happy ending. But it's not in the cards for us. We might as well face facts and not dreams; love is a wonderful thing, only it can't live very long and we have to grab it on the run. We haven't lived as other people; we can't love like other people. What happened back there, ended back there, Bess; nothing on earth can bring it around again."

Sadness dragged through him when he opened the door and went out. He had never hated to do anything as badly in his life as he hated to shut that door. It was like leaving her behind in another world...

She did not say anything. Maybe it was his imagination, but Bob thought he heard a little whimper of sound, and the sweetness of her lips was still in his memory as he stepped off into the dusty spirals beyond the sidewalk's awning.

10

TOWN MARSHAL Jackson Coronado rolled up a fresh smoke, and wondered if he had been taken in by the man in the flat hat and his questionable companions. He was too old to be gullible; he had been in the law

game long enough to know when things were right and when they were wrong; he would never reconcile himself to the assumption that these four riders were all right. But right now he had a killer to find.

He heard footsteps and they sounded covert; when he glanced quickly around behind him he saw Bob Dalton standing in an awning's gloom, watching him closely. "I just want to warn you Marshal," Bob said, "that right now we are both being watched by a hidden gunman, and any minute might find a bullet aimed at us. If I were you I'd stay off the street, maybe until daylight. I can't tell you what I know, and we must be very careful while we're standing here talking."

Jackson Coronado flipped his cigarette into dust. "You speak strangely, my friend, but I know you mean well. I have a chore to do, and danger can't keep me from the job. I've been in danger so long I have become too well acquainted with it to let it worry me. If it's in the cards, we'll go with that invisible marksman's slug in us; it may not, however, be in the cards and it's one of those gambles we've got to take. If you want to help me, I'll grant you every good wish and start you off by saying Hop to it. But I only hope he crosses my path before he does yours. I owe him a great deal."

Bob muttered for his own benefit: "He doesn't owe you as much as he does me." Then he spoke clearly, saying: "I'll help you. Grat Coronado is the man we want, of course; let's hope we find him. We'd better go in opposite directions. We don't want to stay together. I wish you good luck. But if I find him I'll kill him."

Jackson Coronado nodded. "If you find him you'll have to kill him," he agreed. "I don't think I shall organize a posse; it would be taking too much risk and we don't want to scare him off. We'll work quietly. If you fetch him in I'll appreciate it and see you are well paid. Now get going and luck be with you, fella."

They touched their hats and Bob, not wishing to attract the marshal's attention to where he was going, went across the street, up to the crossroads and around the corner until he came to the alley, that cut through from the street to the rear of the hotel. He stamped along slowly, but he kept his ears alert. For all he knew, the quarry had left his vantage point on the hotel's roof and was in the darkness, waiting, ahead of him.

Thought of the marshal cheating him out of his chance to square the score against Grat Coronado made him uneasy and impatient. He had come too far on the manhunt and he had risked too much, to lose out now, within reach of his prey. But he knew Jackson Coronado was gunning for the very man he was hunting.

He came, finally, to a halt within twenty feet of the hotel. Listening, he snagged the dim footsteps on the roof ahead of him. Then he saw a shape outlined against the stars. The figure up there had stooped and was peering over the edge, his eyes burning through the darkness and focused directly upon the spot where Bob Dalton stood; then the man went back across the roof again. He disappeared and Bob moved away from the alley, turning into a narrow areaway beside the building and a stone wall which was all that was left of a rock building that had stood there and had been razed by fire.

Hugging the hotel wall, Dalton found a drainpipe but he knew he could not climb this; he would have to wait for the killer to come down. He did not know when that would be, only knew Grat Coronado could not stay up there forever. The one consolation he had served him well; he had caught up with the man he had hunted all these years...

DALTON stood leaning against the clapboards. It then suddenly occurred to him that there was one way to reach the roof or Grat would not be there. When he came upon this realization his pulses quickened, and he covertly moved away from the drain pipe. He paused again for a moment, trying to guess

how the man had achieved his vantage point. When the idea jolted him, he lifted his shoulders quickly and brushed away a bead of clammy sweat that crept down the left side of his face. The sweat-globule had the heaviness of a rough piece of rope.

Only that afternoon he had seen the opening in the ceiling over the rain barrel outside the Kansas City girl's bedroom door. The hall was low; the loft door might easily be reached from the edge of the barrel.

He looked out at the street, but saw nothing of interest. He observed that the sparse lights that had been burning in this town when he left the marshal were now dimmed down. Nebraska City, prepared for the county fair's opening tomorrow had put its best bib and tucker and most peaceful face. Banners strung across the streets and the intersection, fluttered and whipped themselves into a rage in the unpleasant prairie wind. A single yellow lance of light flitered through the batwings of *The Mansion*. Dust dropped a swirling curtain over the falsefronts.

Into a bronze stain of light Bob walked carefully. For one bare, immeasurable second he was exposed, but he had to run that chance. He inched along the planks, slipped up the hotel steps, taking two at a time, and passed surreptitiously through the lobby. Finally he came to the second floor landing. Orange shade fell around the Kansas City girl's room. He stopped and waited, debating.

If he reached the loft he would have to get up on the roof without attracting Grat Coronado's attention. If he failed, then he would fail the girl who lay helplessly, but peacefully, motionless under the willows. He uttered a silent prayer, without having any vision of God, then stepped up on the rim of the water barrel, supporting himself with one hand palm flat against the big flowered wall paper, and here he tarried, straining to get a handhold on the edge of the trap door so he could hoist himself into the loft.

In this success he breathed deeply; his agility served him with excellent grace. He crouched there in the ratty and dusty silence and heard the Kansas City girl open the door. It was not for long, however, that it stayed open. The hall door was closed gently and there was no other sound.

Bob had two things for which to be thankful. One was his keen hearing and the other was his iron control over his nerves. It was pitch-black in the loft. He crawled inch by inch toward a streak of light from an opening in the roof. But he suddenly stopped moving. His exploring hands had found a wooden ladder and his eyes followed the ladder to an open trap door in the roof above his head.

He did not hesitate, being sure this was the way Coronado had reached his vantage point—a point from which he had been able to watch the entire street and see everything that took place—to watch the manhunt if it swung into motion. He climbed the short ladder, making no sound. The brief strand of rope with the noose in it was in his shirt pocket, an ever-present remainder of the task that lay before him.

When his head cautiously emerged into the starlight a cool gust of air hit him. Clammy sweat on his face quickly dried there. He unholstered his gun, clamped his hand upon the butt and he looked inquiringly around him. A tall figure twenty feet away stood framed in the gild of the moon.

Bob Dalton leaped upward through the opening. The man at the front end of the roof and brought the carbine down even with his stomach and his right hip. Evidently he couldn't see well enough to satisfy himself and he chanced one step forward. Just then Bob swung himself erect and threw his .44 down from shoulder height.

Grat Coronado raised his left foot. It stayed there, suspended, and he did not move. He was like a figure frozen in ice. Grat held his pose a long time. He must have seen his

peril, must have discovered the man who confronted him beyond the trap door. Coronado dropped a lurid oath, then made a quick, desperate motion with his hands.

Bob knew the seconds that passed could not be measured, then came the roar and cracking echo of guns. Both guns spat flame. Each man saw the other, not through gunsights but with slitted, menacing eyes. The taut brief struggle could not last long. One or the other would fall; maybe, Bob thought, it was his time to go. The night's starlight gilded them and gave Coronado a sculptured bronze effect. The explosions were sharp and hurled their echoes off across the rooftops of the false-fronts.

11

BESS QUEEN had been rudely awakened from her dreaming at the desk in her back office by somebody who was knocking on the front door. She knew this meant trouble. She was gripped by the deadly silence that fell in the wake of the sound. Then came the rattle and metallic turning of the knob and the door was shaken with violence.

It did not take her a moment to sense the full depth of her danger. It struck her as cruel—a little while ago she had been aroused by love. She confessed to herself that she was for the first time in love; it had come to her with the insistance of a belated romance that would not be denied this time. She might have told herself before this that she would never fall in love; but the desires of brain and body—her body—had triumphed.

The straight form of her was in silhouette against the lemon brightness of the bracket lamps behind her. She turned and blew out the light. Warning came to her; her instinct to protect herself was that of a haunted being. She knew that out there, intent on breaking into the house, was the one man in the world that she dreaded to face.

She remembered Joe Barnes and what she had heard about him. She had been afraid all day that Barnes would seek her out, would learn of her position as head of the Nebraska desperadoes who had so boldly flaunted their daring in other states; knowing Barnes was in town, and dubious of George Ellsworth's intentions regarding her, she could expect nothing but death—because she would not be taken by anyone. Yes, that was the U.S. Marshal out there, and he had come to arrest her.

Softly she opened the door. Grat Coronado had warned her to expect Barnes, and the lawman's furtive night visit was sufficent to goad her and to make her apprehensive. She hoped it wasn't Barnes; she would welcome anyone now save the federal agent. She was partially undressed, her hair was a cascading stream of copper red.

She opened the door to the storeroom. She took two covert steps, alarmed because the boards creaked. She clung to the wall. Her right hand gripped a .44 Frontier model Colt fully loaded. The gun was awkward, heavy.

Barnes had already entered the room; he stood peering at her. There were no words spoken. They just stood there for a moment, the interior filled with the marshal's rasping breath.

When Barnes inched forward she saw his big square hand grip the butt of his gun and pull it half out of the holster on his hip. Then she fired at him, not waiting, taking careful aim; she fired again, barely moving the weapon with the pressure. Chain lightning jumped through the semi dark that enveloped the room and crimson rosebuds fell out of the flames. Joe Barnes ducked down low, and came up with his fists pounding hell's fire and brimstone at the apparition twenty-five feet distant.

Barnes put the six bullets in her face less than two inches apart. Bess

felt the impact of the first; after that she did not feel anything. The hard thud of her body as it slanted against the floor sounded eerily across the quiet of the room.

Barnes peered down at her as she lay white and motionless and scarlet on the floor. Her fine spun hair mercifully concealed the gaping red holes in her face.

The marshal touched her with his boot, pushed against her. He saw the cream-white legs lying pressed against each other and the beauty of her. Although he was a tough man his lips jerked a little and he closed his eyes in the fumes of the spent gunpowder. Then he walked to the counter, where the bolts of dry goods showed their garish edges, and unwrapping several yards of a black soft material he returned to the body, gently covered it up. He put his hat back on his head and walked stolidly to the door. There was nobody out there in sight when he emerged from the building. Slowly he shut the door behind him, stood a moment sucking in the fresh prairie air; then with slow but emphatic steps, he moved off along the board walk toward the hotel.

* * *

THE GUN battle on the roof of the hotel raged furiously. The moon's silken yellow light revealed to Bob Dalton the face of the man he wanted to destroy. He was risking his life to make it last longer. It couldn't be too swift; there had to be punishment in it, even severe torture, and with that object in mind, Bob deliberately missed his first shot at Coronado's left shoulder and felt the latter's bullet graze his cheek.

The man's rifle spat purple tipped flame again, and the whine of the shot echoed far across the rooftops of the town. Staggering back, this time with another furrow across the same cheek, Bob felt a little sick. Slowly, deliberatly he aimed his Colt just as Grat Coranado brought his rifle up for another try, after ejecting the spent cartridge. The shell rolled across the floor and stopped against the stone chimney with a little clink of sound in the hammering silence between gun blasts.

Twice Dalton slammed bullets at his antagonist and twice he hit the man, once in the left arm and one slug made a soft smack as it ripped through the flesh of his left thigh. Grat almost went down, but stayed erect, and ejected another shell. Bob lunged then, taking a long, rolling step, firing from a crouched position. This time he was surer of his aim; he heard the leaden pellet make a swish, whoosh, sound as it buried itself in gristle, muscle and bone high on Coronado's shoulder. The latter jumped, whirled and tried to cripple away, the gun dragging behind him. Bob shot forward, kept going toward his man who now was bent over in a corner of the roof. When he did not try to use his rifle, but instead dropped it and made a grab for his Colt, Bob shot him again. This time he sent a slug into his opponent's right shoulder, and the tug of the bullet bent Coronado almost double. He was helpless now; the winner of this strange duel went on until he stood within a foot of his quarry. In his left hand was the short rope with the noose in it, and he lifted his knee, brought it against Coronado's chin; when the other dropped over backward, Bob pounced upon him. He seized him by the hair, rolled and lifted his head and slid the widening noose over it, pulling the rope down until the noose circled Coronado's throat. The smell of blood was pungent on the night air, as Bob, with one knee on Coronado's chest, tautened the noose.

He pulled hard on the rope, the noose sinking deep into his quarry's throat. By degree he was shutting off the man's wind, and his great chest rose and fell and sweat thickened like past on his paling face. Not a word did Dalton speak, but nothing in the universe would have stopped him now. He had put all his strength into the lugging at the ends of the rope and now the noose was so taut around Coronado's throat the big, broad face began to turn purple in the moonlight. His eyes bulged, his

mouth fell open.

He released the rope and let it stay there on the man's chest, and it was like a tan colored snake lying in a coil that lifted and fell hard with each slow, laborious breath of the half strangled victim of the killing. Bob counted ten. Then he said: "You'd like for me to stop, wouldn't you, Coronado? She would have liked for you to have spared her, under those willows. But you didn't; you murdered her just as I'm murdering you. In one minute you will be dead. Do you hear me? In sixty seconds there won't be an ounce of life left in your cowardly heart. Die, and in dying, pray that you won't have to burn in hell for a million years, you craven, yellow-hearted fiend—"

Bob grabbed the ends of the rope and again, without mercy and with only the hatred burning in his brain for the miserable, squirming object under his knees, Bob put the completing touches to his task. He heard a low moan; the dying man sought to lift his head off the floor, but Bob pushed against his blood-smeared face with the palm of his left hand and twisted the rope into the soft, yielding flesh of his prey. It was done, mercilessly, silently and completely; it was done.

He rose, stepped back and surveyed his job; for the first time in years—since the beginning of the long hunt—he felt free of that fire that had raged in his veins and the fever that had burned his skin day and night. He was alone, unshackled...

* * *

THE BEDLAM that had unleashed itself when word got around that Bess Queen was dead had grown into a roar of sounds. Marshal Jackson Coronado felt the crowd rushing against him, running in all directions and dust swirled against the falsefronts until the windows were coated with it. The lawman knew that with the citizens aroused to this pitch of frenzy there wouldn't be a single renegade left in Neb City when morning came.

The pressure of the stampede hurled him against the wall of the hotel; men ran in and out of this establishment; guns were fired and the din was increased until it resembled the falling in of the sky and the anguish of dying souls. He heard grating voices and smelled sweaty flesh. And over all this, over the clatter and rumble of vehicles and the milling human tide, continued to swirl those choking, annoying, deepening balloons of dust.

He moved on through the crowd, entering the lobby of the hotel, and he stood by the open door, with perspiration making his shirt wet and rivering off his face, and got his breath. Then he started moving toward the steps that led upward to the second floor, reached these and climbed them slowly. As he passed the rain barrel which was full of bath water he did not see the open loft door. He stopped and leaned against the wall, rolling a cigarette and striking a Lucifer which lit up his face and the stern lines that anxiety had put there. There was nothing he could do down in the street. He could not stop that mad rush of embattled townsmen; let justice pursue its own course, he thought. Nebraska City was due for a house-cleaning and, by daybreak, the self appointed judges and jurors would have things pretty well in hand.

He feared for George Ellsworth, but really the man had it coming to him. Jackson had been startled to learn that Bess Queen had bossed the horse-thieves and was a notorious renegade who belonged in the same rank and file as Belle Starr and Montana Nell Bridges. She had played the game smoothly, and her fastidious bearing had profited her handsomely.

Moreover the marshal had been surprised to learn that George Ellsworth had tipped off the federal lawman, and he knew the gambler entertained his own special and private reasons for this. Afraid Ellsworth would be caught in the maelstrom, Jackson wondered if he needed protection and finally decided

that, even if he did, he was not going to volunteer his services to a man who had never been clean and above board but a slick charlatan who had preyed on the ignorance of his victims. If Bess Queen had paid the full price, certainly George Ellsworth deserved to go the same way.

What had become of the Missourian, Timberlake? The town marshal knew Timberlake was of finer quality when viewed in the same light with other men, and he found himself hoping for the other's safety. Jackson Coronado was sure he would never forget the look on the Missourian's face as he stood there in the presence of the dead, maltreated girl on the horse-ranch. It was this expression that had convinced Jackson of Timberlake's innocence.

He shook his head and walked on past the water barrel and he knocked on the door of Verlene's room. So many things were taking place down in the street he asked himself why he was here. His life had come to a pause before a shimmering curtain and he knew on the other side of this curtain was a woman—a young, pretty, headstrong woman.

He heard the hollow echo of his knocking run out through the open windows, and it tromped into the yells and the raucous swearing of booted and dusty men. Suddenly there was a blast of gunfire, and he thought it sounded above him.

Just then the girl's bedroom door was quietly opened and she stood there gazing out at him and there was a disturbed light in her eyes.

12

SHE WATCHED him, a flush on her cheeks and excitement in her eyes. There was something direct and speculative in her gaze. Her quick, disarming smile gave him encouragement.

"What's going on down there?" she asked. "And there's something taking place up on the roof. A while ago I heard sounds out in the hall, over there by the barrel. I looked out and a man was climbing through the trap door in the ceiling. I barely saw his feet. One spur had a broken rowel. I think the man was the same one I saw in the dining room—the one who protected the dog and killed that gunfighter early this afternoon."

Jackson Coronado came to himself with a jerking of his strong shoulders; looked down at her. He put one hand out against the wall. His palm touched paper. He quickly discerned that it was a reward poster.

WANTED
DEAD OR ALIVE
MISSOURI BANDIT
BOB DALTON

The description sent a rush of uneasiness through Jackson. The girl's studying eyes were turning darker, There was the power of devotion in her and quick and ready sympathy. He turned away from the printed notice. A man's voice came through the window. Jackson swiftly crossed to the window and leaned far out, saw Joe Barnes standing on the walk across the street. He faced a crew of dusty, big-hatted and hurriedly formed vigilantes who were grouped in the road in front of him.

"Bob Dalton should be up there in the hotel," the U.S. Marshal said, lifting his voice. "Surround the building and don't let anybody out; no man, no woman. I'm going over there and search the place. You fellows take up your positions and have your guns handy. The outlaw is a killer and a demon with his guns. Shoot first when you think you've sighted him. Be ready—"

The girl touched Jackson's arm and he wheeled around to face her. He had seen George Ellsworth stop beside the federal lawman and in a low voice say something to him.

"Who's Bob Dalton?" she asked.

Jackson Coronado forced a slow smile. "The man who shot Blaine

Decker over the dog, I'm sure," he said.

Her face, soft and lovely, moved in amazement and Jackson saw faint lines crease around her mouth. But he had made his decision. They were coming into the hotel, after the man on the roof. The vigilantes would take him away from Barnes. The U.S. lawman had made a blunder; if the vigilantes didn't take Dalton away from Barnes, then the Federal man would kill Dalton without giving him a chance. That would be because of Dalton's reputation as an expert gunhawk.

Coronado edged down the hall and peered up at the loft door and something moved. A drop of blood touched his hand; warm and scarlet in the lamplight. Jackson shoved the girl back away from him. Raising his face to the door above him, the Neb City Marshal said: "Come on down, Dalton. If you do, you'll be my prisoner and I won't let the mob take you away from me. It's the only chance you've got. They're mob crazy out there because Barnes killed Bess Queen. George Ellsworth furnished Barnes with proof that she headed the horsethieves and train robbers. Ellsworth probably also put the U.S. Marshal on your trail, but whether he did or if he didn't—you're in a trap. Better come on down and surrender to me."

Jackson stood there, hands swinging away from his guns, aware that above him was the most deadly of all outlaws, a Missouri bandit who was worse that the James boys.

"You turn your back and raise your hands above your head," said Dalton, "And I'll come down, Marshal."

Jackson Coronado did not hesitate. he turned around and lifted his arms. He heard the fugitive hit the floor. All along he had felt that he would meet Dalton and now, knowing who he was, he felt a moving sympathy for the man.

Dalton holstered his gun. The left shoulder of his shirt was soaked with blood. Jackson saw how pale his face was and observed the unsteady demeanor of the fugitive. Downstairs, Joe Barnes walked rapidly across the floor toward the staircase.

The girl stepped aside and indicated the open door of her room. "They'll never think to look for him in there," she said. Jackson saw the self-assurance and reliance she had.

WHEN THE Neb City marshal had pushed Bob gently into the room, he quickly stepped in behind him and shut the door. The girl was barely breathing, standing at his elbow. "You go on over there, Dalton, and get in that closet. We'll have to do some bluffing."

A moment later, Barnes passed the door, moving with caution. They heard him pounding on the door of Bob's quarters. "Come out, Dalton," he said crisply. "The house is surrounded and you can't get away."

Two minutes passed, more knocking was heard, then Barnes tried the knob. He cursed softly and then came back down the hall and stopped. They heard him breathing just outside.

Jackson frowned. It was a bad situation; he had not counted on this. But he had never doubted the U.S. man's thoroughness as a man hunter. No doubt he had found the fugitive's black stallion in the livery stable and had concluded that Dalton was still in town. He had searched around without finding him. As a last resort he had come to the hotel.

Quickly Jackson opened the door. He steeled his voice. "Why, hello, Joe," he said, feigning surprise.

The other officer scrutinized Jackson with a small, thin smile, and he sent a sharp, side glance at the girl. He must have seen something on her face, for his smile vanished; he spoke to Jackson in a strangely provoking tone. "I didn't expect to find you here, Coronado," he said, "but since you are, I don't reckon there's any need to look through this room. I was here a while back to talk to this lady, having heard that she'd had some jewelry stolen. She said you'd found it and restored it to her. Later, I learned you'd killed the thief at the town's barn. You're an efficient lawman, Marshal. I congratulate you. Of course you know about Bob Dal-

ton, the notorious Missouri outlaw—"

"I have heard much regarding Dalton's fictional-sounding exploits. They put him in the same category with the James boys." Jackson rubbed his chin. "But there's no outlaw in this room, you can bet on that. I've been completing my report on the jewel theft. I have been here for the past ten minutes."

Barnes placed his slitted and powerful eyes on Jackson. "The man I want is the one who downed Decker in the gunfight and who claims his name's Timberlake. You'd better keep your ears alert and don't pass up any bets. The reward is sufficent to compensate you for any trouble you might have in apprehending the bandit."

Jackson said, with his normal composure, "I'll do my best, but I'm afraid Dalton has left town. He wouldn't stay here with the excitement at a high-pitch like it is down in the street. Men like him have a way of finding out when the weather's getting too warm for their comfort. He won't be easy to run down; I am basing my opinion on his record, you know."

Barnes' eyes stopped in their roaming and in their depths a great suspicion moved with heaviness. "Yes, I've been everywhere and I haven't let up a minute. If he isn't in this hotel—well, it's just downright funny if he's not in this building. There's no sign of him. But I reckon, on the other hand, he's too smart to let himself get trapped in a place like this; he wouldn't stand a chance. I somehow figgered he might've run in here to get his things. Usually a fellow has some valuables he don't want to run off and leave. I'm wrong, mebbe, and he didn't even come here after a spare shirt."

Jackson knew Barnes was hinting at something. His ire rose but he held himself in hand. It could be the U.S. Marshal figured Coronado wanted to hog the reward and the glory by keeping Dalton out of his, Barnes', reach. Jackson wondered if that was what was the matter with Barnes. However, he said nothing of his thoughts and watched the lawman stir restlessly and his eyes dart around the room.

The fabulous reputation the gunfighting Federal officer bore made him a colorful figure, but he was ruthless and not admirable. He had certain characteristics that made him loathsome. He had double-crossed more than one law-enforcement agent to cheat him out of rewards and honors, and Jackson knew Barnes wanted Dalton more than he had ever wanted to apprehend a criminal in his life. The seconds ticked away until the silence between them became embarrassing, and then Barnes edged away from the door.

Finally he nodded his head and lifted the black chin strap off his chin. He drew a handkerchief and wiped away moisture that had accumulated on his bony face. In his eyes Jackson read a suspicion that burned like little lamps. He touched his hat brim, threw a thin smile at the girl; he went away then, toward the stairway. Before he went down the steps he turned and looked squarely at Jackson, smiled again, lifted his hand and went on down the stairs without uttering another word.

When Jackson Coronado turned back into the room, he saw Bob Dalton standing with his shoulders tipped back against the closet door. The blood was still fresh on his shirt and his face was streaked with scarlet. His eyes were half closed and inscrutable.

"You've done enough, Marshal," Bob said, lifting himself away from the door with a effort. "A man makes friends and he makes enemies. I've done my little chore and there's nothing that I have left undone. You play your cards if you're a gambler and you win the jackpot you're after, if you're lucky. So, now no matter how unlucky I might appear to be, I don't consider myself that way. There's only one request—just one favor I can ask of you. My horse is my pal—the one friend I could trust until I met you two folks. He's a good horse. Here in the lady's presence, Marshal, I will you my black horse. You'll find him at the stable. He's worth a lot of looking after and

he'll never let you down. Will you take him, Marshal, and give him the same care I would have if circumstances had allowed me to stay with him? I wouldn't trust him with everybody, but I know what you'll do for him if you accept him as a kind of gift."

Jackson Coronado nodded.

Tears came to Varlene Stafford's eyes. Jackson walked over and stood beside her. He saw Dalton move to the door. He lifted his shoulders, stood erect, and gave each a fleeting smile. He stepped out into the hall and closed the door. Jackson Coronado let him go, knowing that here was a chance to reap a big harvest of money and glory. Coronado stood there, with beads of cold sweat on his face and heard the fugitive go straight to his room at the end of the hall.

* * *

TEN MINUTES later, Jackson Coronado shouldered through the men grouped together on the wooden walk in front of the hotel and walked across the street toward the Mansion. He met Sheriff Len Lucas in front of the saloon and the latter clutched his shoulder with a pudgy hand. With the sheriff was old Bill Crow, the stage driver.

Wheezing and mopping sweat, Lucas said, "Marshal, I know what you can do with your guns, and this surely is a time when your great skill is goin' to come in handy. George Ellsworth is holed up in the *Mansion* and he'll kill anyone that tries to take him. I got a warrant for his arrest. He's wanted in Saint Joe for murder. The papers just reached me and I ain't got the ability to take him. He's a slicker, Marshal; he's one of the meanest gun hands that ever come down the pike."

Startled and with surprise gripping, him, Jackson removed the papers from the minion's fat hands and gazed at them in the jonquil light from the street. He read George Ellsworth's real name, gazed at his picture on a reward poster pinned to the warrant and then he nodded. "I reckon the thing to do is go in there and get him. But—what about the back way; mebbe he has escaped and is not in there now."

"I got deputies back there," Lucas said. He was pale and there was a scared look on his fleshy face. There was also anxiety—an eagerness to put his job off on another man's shoulders because it was a dangerous job. He had been known to do that before.

Peering down the street, the Neb City Marshal saw a cordon of riders whose mounts kicked up the dust into lazy dense spirals that were like rippling pennants. They were the same men he had seen before, Jonk and Aldermann; the small man in the little flat hat was in the lead. They rode slowly as if bent upon some particular mission—a mission of importance. Then suddenly they opened fire with guns they'd quickly brought out of concealment, and the fat sheriff nearly knocked Jackson down getting away from the lighted window of the *Mansion*. But the horsemen were gone when Jackson stepped down into the street, with his gun in his hand. They had rounded the corner of the bank and he could hear above the loud excited yelling of the mob the hoofbeats of the four horses.

Wondering at this, but still with a task before him that had to be completed, Jackson moved toward the saloon, crossing the walk with slow, emphatic steps. He did not see Len Lucas, but Bill Crow waited for him under the awning.

"You'd better be downright careful, son," Crow warned. "Funny how all this time a wanted man has been right here under our nose and we ain't never heard nothin' till Lucas got them papers. But—what about that group of crazy riders that just rode down the street. Don't reckon they're th' James boys, do you?"

"I'll think about that later," Coronado said. "You round up some men and investigate the shooting. They've probably got drunk and are trying to stir up more excitement than we have right now, probably just trying to add to the confusion. The James boys—" Coronado stared off into dusty space; he nodded several times. "Well, go ahead, Bill, and

watch your skin; don't get it perforated."

The old stagedriver's eyes dimmed.

WHEN JACKSON slapped the batwings open he found the spacious room empty. The murals glared mockingly back at him. It was like a parade ground after the banners and band and glory had disappeared. It seemed big and cold and barren; even the garish colors on the walls had lost their brightness and were dull to the searching eyes of the lean marshal as he paused on the threshold.

Then he found the black-suited figure who had appeared on the gallery and was leaning over the balustrade. There was a gun in George Ellsworth's thin pale hand.

"George," Jackson said coldly, "I've got a warrant for your arrest and I reckon you'd better come down from there. I imagine you won't have much trouble remembering what you've done in your past, and the worst thing is what I want you for. While you're at it you might tell me what connection you had with the late Bessie Queen."

"I don't answer no more questions, fella," Ellsworth said. "If you've got that warrant you spoke about come on up here and serve it on me. I've been hearing about what a great gun hand you are; you've never heard what I can do with a gun because it hasn't leaked out. But I can take care of myself and your high-toned rep isn't going to scare me one bit. In this game you can't bluff, Jackson. The one that tries to run the bluff is the one who usually loses the jackpot. My hole card is right here in my hand. It has never failed me before and it won't now. Start coming in this direction if you want me. I'll guarantee I won't run away." His voice was husky and his face was starch white. His eyes were like livid coals of fire and the mad glow touched the marshal's face.

Jackson moved slowly toward the staircase. He realized he was at a disadvantage, but he would have to make the best of the situation. Ellsworth took a long step sideways and brought up the gun so it rested in a downward line with Jackson who now stood in the middle of the room. "I'm coming up there," Jackson said; "if you want to make it hard on yourself go ahead."

"The James boys are riding hell bent for a shooting out with the law," Ellsworth said. "You heard them a minute or two ago, didn't you? Instead of concentrating your efforts on me why don't you try keeping Bob Dalton from escaping when the James boys rob the bank? It's a ruse and you're crazy to let them get away with it. It's all a big stall to get Dalton out of that trap he's in over at the hotel. I'm a little man alongside Dalton; look at the glory that'll come to the officer that gets Bob Dalton, the Missouri bandit."

Jackson was surprised at this bit of information, knew it was sound and hesitated. But he had gone too far and deep in his heart he didn't wish Dalton any bad luck. "I'm still coming up there after you," he decided. "I'm one lawman; if Barnes and his friends and Lucas can't stand off the owlhoots, I can't help them. My job is to get you, George. Are you walking down those steps?"

"You know damned well I'm not," was the surly retort. "Keep on walking."

"I'm walking," Jackson Coronado said coldly. He stepped forward and saw Ellsworth leap aside and take the slack out of the trigger of his .45. The gun's report vibrated through the room. It was like a giant firecracker had exploded in a barrel. Flame slashed at the marshal. Sparks dropped away and smoke curled from the spout of the weapon. Ellsworth swung around for another shot. Jackson snapped two slugs at him. Ellsworth's bullet hissed through the sawdust and tore splinters out of the floor. Not three feet away was a wooden column with a cloth tobacco sign on it, and the red and yellow letters drew the marshal's attention. He slid over to the post just as Ellsworth raised his arms and cried, "I'm coming down. I don't want no more of this. Stop

firing at me and so help me Gawd, I'll come down."

Holding his revolver at his side, Jackson waited, nodding briefly and saw the gambler start down the staircase. He moved on steady legs through the gunsmoke, a straight-formed man whose bald head belied the agility of his muscles, a man who looked older than he was and not meant for fighting with weapons, but with only his brain. Step by step he marched down the wooden blocks, his feet making no sound on the carpet.

Jackson watched George Ellsworth reach the last step, and he saw the the man's gun, which he held in a stiff arm, pointed at the floor. The marshal thought he was going to toss the Colt away, but he didn't. He took too many steps toward Coronado; they were less than twenty feet apart, and it was plain that the gambler had meant to halt before his legs stopped moving. Now he whirled like a cat and brought his gun up even with his waist and his head craned forward.

The marshal's revolver was ready and he sidled away from the post. Ellsworth must have observed his readiness to resume the argument of the guns, but he was so certain of his superior speed he ignored the threat to his own well being.

It was obvious that the bald-headed man saw his goal as completed, because when he lifted his weapon against the lightning fast motion of his opponent in this bizarre duel, he put his red rimmed eyes on Jackson with a smile of triumph twisting his poker face out of shape. He made his snap shot and surely must have heard the lawman's Colt pour its gray dust of death at him; Jackson felt the wind of the slug's passage beside his head. The explosion's protracted echo lingered over the brief silence.

The gambler's mouth fell open, wide open, and his shirt puffed up on the breastbone and settled again, and a little ruby spot stained the white starched front. Then he canted his round head at Jackson Coronado and fell to the sawdust covered boards. There was a soft thump and the man's legs kicked once; he turned completely over and when he gasped his last breath his face was pressed flat against the floor.

Jackson Coronado, his face stained with gun-soot, walked quickly to the wooden column and examined the gaudy cloth sign. In it he saw a black bullet hole. The way he was standing—fully erect—the bullet hole was exactly even with his heart. A little sickening shudder ran through him; a hole like that had caused George Ellsworth's death!

* * *

THE BANDITS rode across the intersection firing heavy guns into the running townsmen who were racing for shelter. The man in the flat hat turned his Morgan charger, and waving his hat with his left hand, yelled like an Indian; the three others forming the cordon made a solid short line in front of the bank. What followed was done in a hurry.

Two men left their places on the sidewalk, tore up the steps of the *Homeplace Bank,* and shot through the open door into the saffron lamplight. Meanwhile the others kept up a desultory fusillade with their Frontier Models, hurling lead up and down the sidewalks, raking the whole street with a devastating fire.

Nobody cared to risk facing them. In the boiling dust the horsemen sat their prancing steeds with the bridle reins around their necks, using their firearms with a merciless and desperate skill. Men plunged to the ground; one rolled off the high wooden curb; and several tried to burrow into the wooden walls of the falsefronts.

Coming out upon the gallery of the hotel porch Bob Dalton saw the confusion, beheld the mob when they broke away from in front of the establishment and dash for safety; saw the ring of guards surrounding the building melt back into the darkness, and waited, with a stern frown on his face. Then he left his vantage point, fled through the hall and down the staircase. When he hit the walk he was just one among a hundred fleeing men who did not care to risk the murderous fire of the Missouri

bandits who were robbing the bank.

Bob found his way through the alley, retracing his steps down the areaway he had followed to the completion of his task only a little while ago. When he came to the other street, he turned down this and approached the bank from the dark fringe along the row of falsefronts and stone buildings. He met nobody but here and there spotted the red tip of a cigarette in an empty doorway. It was hard to tell who were your friends and who were your enemies in a matter of this kind.

He continued on his way. He saw Jesse James, and his brother Frank, who poured a volley of pistol shots into the blacker patches of the night. He heard yells and hoarse screams and knew somebody was getting in the bank with a manhunt already on and the streets crammed with vigilantes who had appointed themselves to the task of apprehending the Dalton outlaw.

Bob grinned, but it was too serious and he knew the bloodshed that was rife at the moment would take its place in legend to mark the crimson trail of the notorious James boys. Suddenly he saw four men pour out of a doorway and he forgot that he was standing in front of a lighted window. One of them cried, "There he is now! There's Dalton—!"

He did not recognize any of the attackers, only knew they were coming at him with groping hands and flailing fists. It had been his bad luck to stop right there in the glow of those store lamps and within reach of four members of the manhunting party. But luck had tricked him this way before, and instead of lamenting, he began to fight against the pushing tide of sweaty bodies.

Bob felt himself being clipped on the shoulders and hurled back against the window. He had his hands lifted, and threw a few punches at the bobbing ducking faces around him. There was hard breathing in the yellow haze and the scuffing of coarse boots.

Then he recognized Jake Coronado! The horse wrangled had led this dim-witted gang against him. It had been Jake's voice that he had heard; now he directed a smashing blow at the horsethief's bloated face. Jake rasped and fell off the curb and rolled in the billowing dust and crawled to his knees. "Get that damned owlhoot," he gasped. "Don't let him get away—!"

BOB TOOK a savage licking. Fists hammered against him, rained on his face and drove furiously against his chest. He saw his antagonists as shadows and he bowed his shoulders and plunged ahead. He caught one of them on the chin and drove that one into the dust beside Jake Coronado. One of the two remaining were behind him and hitting him in the back of the head. Bob made a swift turn and tore into him, feeling the other man's fists cutting the hide away from his cheek bones. He had his man against the wall now; he did not tarry. He broke the fellow's grip on his shirt, seized one arm and spinning about, broke that arm across his shoulder. He heard the bones snap and the scream of that was rent from the victim's throat. He let him fall, heard his body slush in a soft fall on the boards. Now he faced the last member of the quartet who had been trying to get at him but couldn't because he had kept the man with the broken arm in the way.

The attack his opponent launched was savage and punished him. He kept rearing up to the balls of his feet and reaching Bob with a longer arm and ramming him so hard Bob didn't see how his head stayed on his shoulders. But he forced his antagonist away, by beating him in the stomach, and dazed as he was, he ducked the frenzied blows the other was sending at him in a crazed attempt to knock him out. The man had lost his reason, and blinded by his fury he left himself wide open to Bob's excruciating short arm blows. He soon had his man on his knees and was showering his upturned face with flesh mangling fists. His adversary had hold of his shirt and was trying to pull him over. Then Bob shoved a hard knee against his

chin and watched him drop unconscious to the sidewalk.

Bob straightened up, pulled his heavy shellbelt up so it was evenly balanced on his hips, then darted away from that lamplit window. A last ragged hope stayed alive in his chest and he slunk along, wondering if the men behind him would give pursuit and wondering, too, how he would reach the livery stable to get King. He kept maneuvering through the brown stain of the unlighted places, keeping to the wooden awnings and the obscuring shadows. He saw more of those red-tipped cigarettes scattered along the street and once he went so close to a smoker the man could have reached out and grabbed him. But the latter did not pay Bob any heed; he was watching the flameboyant fireworks display made by the bandits with their guns in front of the bank. He saw a horse trample Jake to death.

If he didn't get his horse he would be caught unprepared; he would never escape from this town alive. Dalton had no further desire to stay here. His work had been accomplished, Bess Queen was dead and nothing remained but the hollow shells of memories so unpleasant he wished to forget them at once. Jake Coronado's dying screams stayed in his ears.

A crowd was swerving down the middle of the street, and he heard the deep husky voice of the U.S. Marshal Joe Barnes. "Give 'em hell when you get within shooting distance." Barnes yelled. "We've got to meet them in a straight unbreakable line, each man about four feet from his closest neighbor. Form a rank four deep. I'll run up there with some of you boys and cut the other street off so they'll have to run into that block of wagons we got to the east. By then the others will have blocked the road to the west and they'll be trapped. Don't let them get through you!"

Dalton saw Barnes running away then with a dozen men trotting at his heels, some armed with shotguns, others carried saddle carbines and some just had revolvers. But it was a menacing group and they would be hard to deal with once they had completed the blockade.

Bob lifted his revolver. Without a leader, the possemen wouldn't be as effective; he brought the gun down on a level with Barnes' running figure; but he stalled, thinking better of the idea. He didn't want that on his mind. It was his chance but he let it go; there wasn't any killing left in him. He felt clean, wanted to stay that way. The girl under the willows would sleep better.

The crowd had whirled away to trap the bandits. Barnes was a small shadow weaving through the street light which fell in spooky furrows across the thick dust. A man lurched against Bob and he shoved him off, saying, "Watch where you're going, Mister." The man spun round at his voice and, after staring at him a split second, rushed at him, intent on grabbing him around the waist. Bob laid the barrel of his gun over his head. The enemy slanted downward and Bob heard the thud and stomp of his boots.

THE JAMES boys were through with the bank; they whipped their horses around and came tearing down the street. Bob ran as hard as he could, he sought to reach the stable. Now there was more bedlam and shooting and yelling and the windows of the storefronts rattled. Wildness suddenly shut Bob in; he was overtaken by the mob that had poured out of the side street brandishing weapons and swept on by the fury of the tide. He ran along with them. He raised his voice and shouted: "Get the James boys! They'll jump their horses over the wagons!"

But they didn't; they came tearing back and firing at ramdom into the crowd. Bob heard a slug sing past his head. He saw Jesse James leaning forward in his saddle and waving his flat hat at his companions to come on. They had discovered the wagon blockade. Dust made a choking acrid roll of screen across their backs. Flames stabbed at the pursuers. A man tumbled headlong from his horse and was dragged when one

foot caught in a stirrup. Bob heard him scream at his nag: "Damn you —stop!"

Bob was less than ten yards from the stable and he made a dash for the entrance. He reached it, being stopped near the doorway by a new mob of stampeding townsmen. He elbowed through them. They were intent on giving chase to the fleeing bandits. From the distance behind Bob came the thunder of gunfire.

He was in the barn now, and knowing his directions because he had taken stock of the interior of the stable earlier in the day, he was able to find his saddle and bridle, and with the gear he hurried to King's stall. In the flickering orange lantern light he soon had the stallion ready for the road. He patted him on his arched neck, stroked his mana, and the black steed turned his head to lick his face. Bob felt his warm tongue and saw the old fire leaping into the stallion's eyes. Here was one friend he could count on; he would stand by him, there would be no doublecrossing.

Aboard his strong mount Bob urged King along the runaway. He knew what he would do once they hit the street.

King streaked through the dust. Men fell out of his way. One cowboy swung his own mount around and tried to block his path. Bob again used his gun as a cudgel, placed the barrel over the head of his victim. The man went sideways out of his saddle and his horse ran away. King whirled and followed the pressure on the bridle rein. He came back running in the direction Bob had originally taken. He jumped over the squirming form of the slugged cowboy who crawled on hands and knees in a desperate effort to escape destruction under the stallion's murderous hoofs.

They were within ten yards of the wagon blockade now. Startled, frightened faces hung suspended in the buff tinted lamplight; and there were a few grim, calm visages with alert and ominous eyes. They seemed to hang there, detached from their bodies. They crouched on the sidewalk and behind the wagons and some were on top of the low frame buildings. Over all this was the boiling cannon fire of dust. Then came the ripping, snarling, screeching slugs that were thrown from those yammering guns with a desperate, insane fury. Bob pointed his gun at those bobbed-off faces, but he knew there was no use and he had no inclination to kill.

UNDAUNTED by the greedy guns of the road-blockers, the great stallion got ready to make the gamble and Bob could feel his muscles settling and the springs coiling in his great back legs; he saw the stallion's neck as he lowered it and stretched it gracefully out like the neck of a flying pheasant. Then he was up off the ground and soaring straight at but above the wagons. He seemed to reach a greater height, and there was ease and supreme elegance in his catapulting body. He was like a giant missle pushed volcanically from an enormous gun aimed into black space.

Bullets whined and roared past them and Bob's brain stopped working, and there was only blankness, complete obliteration, and his breath hung in his taut throat. Men screamed themselves hoarse and the firing ceased and there were no more flame, flashes, and a deep silence fell over the hushed and bewildered spectators. Entranced by the spectacle, by this unbelievable tableau, they groped through the reality of the incredible. Bob was aware only of the lunge and the steady beautiful jump his horse was making.

King seemed to know it was all up to him and the stallion responded to this responsibility with raw courage. Death came closer and grinned malevolently; it even hissed and spat and clawed at the horse and rider in that bare immeasurable second.

They were above the wagons now; plain lumber wagons had been drawn up so close together as to leave not even the smallest opening. A man stood up in one of the wagon beds and slashed at Bob as he was carried past him. He missed, but Bob heard

the hissing contempt of the lash fan past his ear. But there was no gunshot, there was no voice, there was nothing but stillness that sounded like a thousand guns exploding in Bob's head.

They were coming down now, and in the great streamers of dust kicked up by the booted men who scurried out of the stallion's way, they were silhouetted like the winged horse of fabled fame; Bob Dalton breathed and in breathing, inhaled the pungent and gritty dust. The stallion came down lightly, did not waver, nor stagger but hit his old pace which was faster than any competitor's nag who could give chase. Bob raced on, and he did not look back. His time hadn't come; until it did come, he would go through certain death without being injured.

"What's in the cards," he muttered thickly, with the dust acrimonious in his mouth and stinging the tip of his tongue, "will be. If it's not in the cards for me to go with my boots on, then I'll die peacefully in some soft bed, maybe. Who knows? And—who cares—?"

He did not care. He had lived and suffered; now that the long trail had ended and there was nothing more to occupy his mind and his time, he did not care what happened. The long hunt had given him incentive, had braced him, had helped him overcome grave difficulties. It had given him a purpose in life.

The stallion's superior speed ditched all the lunging horses in his wake, and they traveled until morning and the sun on the timber and the open fields created harlequin effect and made it difficult to see with any safe degree of perspective. He came to the bridge and clamored over this, the rods and planks hurling off a far reaching series of echoes. Then the willows loomed up and, in the silence and the purple placidity of the willows, Bob knelt down and put his wife's breastpin back upon the sunken place and moved a big rock so that the gem was protected.

He did not know how long he stayed there, but he heard the James boys ride by in the lane, and knew they had escaped the net of the law and the bloodthirsty townsmen back in Neb City. It wasn't their time, either, Bob thought; when their time came, it would catch them and crush them.

He gave kind thoughts to the marshal and the lady from Kansas City. Funny how people came into your life and slipped out of it and you never saw them again. Of course the marshal would marry the fine lady from Kansas City; it was in the cards. Somehow Bob knew they would marry, and he was glad.

At sundown on the evening of the second day's travel, Bob Dalton crossed the Missouri river at Rulo on a ferry boat and on the morning of the fourth day's travel he entered Saint Joe, Missouri, a man without a purpose.

The dozing man came alive, leaped to his feet and smashed a heavy cane down on the lank killer's head.

Chaparral Law

by T. W. Ford

Bart Mundy was after Big Mike Corfee. He had the train, but Mike had the passengers . . .

IT HAPPENED as the train was straggling upgrade, headed for the Pass, after leaving Elk Bench an hour before. There was just the wheezing engine up ahead, a baggage car carrying the mail, and the creaking day coach tacked on behind. It rounded the bend past a small gorge, creaked on. Then the first bullet smashed through a window pane and shot out one of the coal-oil lamps in the coach. The young woman with the high-piled yellow hair screamed.

She had just been saying to her husband, "No, Henry. Don't argue with me. You only want me as a housekeeper for your place. I'm going home to my folks like I said. I didn't hire out as a hired girl! That's all there is to it. Don't argue with me, Henry! And—" And the scream.

The train rolled on. There were no more shots for a short spell. A long-bodied man up the aisle said, "Probably just some orey-eyed cowhand taking a wild shot at us!" He spat tobacco juice on the floor.

Two men across the aisle straight-

ened up after ducking. The heavier-set one said in a pronounced drawl, "Figgered for a moment it might be a raid on the train. They say that that Big Mike Corfee—you know, who broke out of jail down there in Ajo a few days ago—is headed through these parts on his way to the Border."

"Uh-huh," the other smaller one nodded as he put a match to the half-smoked stogie in his mouth. "The lobo, they say, who never killed a man. Heard it said, he was brought up as a younker right near here somewheres." There was a marked resemblance between him and the other one.

The bigger man agreed. "Somewhere near Elk Bench. They claim he's dangerous as a sidewinder, even if he doesn't kill, though. Slicker'n slobbers. Smart. They say he can talk his way out of a tight. And that he ain't afeared of anything. He's got a posse after him now."

"And the Mundy Bunch is after him too, Hitch," the smaller one put in. "Black Bart Mundy and his outfit. Seems like a few years back this Mike Corfee and Bart's brother tangled in a shooting duel. Corfee crippled him for life. But more than that, he made the man eat crow and show yella. Bart Mundy, they tell it, never forgave Corfee for that. Bart swore he and his Bunch would catch up to Corfee some day."

"That's true, Ed. Only Corfee had his own outfit too, then, small, but a tough un. Say, Ed, mebbe we better think it over more afore we see this Turkey Track Pool that is willing to buy out the outfit. Mebbe—"

"Nope," snapped back Ed. "It was your idea. So we're going through with it. 'S all!"

Up the aisle the young wife with the proud tilt to her head shook it vigorously. "No, Henry, I won't go back to that quarter section you've got."

Down from them, a little back of the two men who'd been talking about Big Mike Corfee, slouched a medium-sized jasper in Levis with a rusty black coat over them. He apparently dozed beneath a front-tilted Mex sombrero. He had a black patch over one eye. And beside him was propped a gnarled cane as if he was apparently lame. He looked down-at-the-heel.

A real fusillade of shots came from the right side of the train where the tracks paralleled a rough now unused stage road. The girl yelled: "Henry, there are a lot of riders out there! Look at them! It's a—"

There were several more reports from up ahead near the straining engine. The whistle wailed once as if in desperation. And the train clanked to a halt. Then there was muffled firing from inside the mail car. The glass-paned door of the passenger coach, up front, was slammed open. Two masked hombres, both toting levelled Colts in each hand, strode in.

The lone gent up front half rose out of his seat, clutching the little black bag he toted. He tried to draw. The leading one of the masked hold-up men shot him twice, coldly. And fatally. The tall passenger rolled out onto the dingy carpet of the train floor, a hole in the side of his head, another blooming like a blossom on the front of his white shirt. Waving aside the gunsmoke with one of his weapons, the first lobo called out:

"If nobody resists, nobody is a-going to git hurt. We're Bart Mundy's outfit—so they's no sense a-trying to buck us. We just want one danged snake!"

He stepped over toward the young married couple. The girl now clung to her husband's arm. Demanded to know who they were.

"Henry and Eva Urson," the husband said calmly. The second outlaw leaned over him to check for a gun, found none.

"You know anything about the whereabouts to Mike Corfee?" the first one barked. "Seen him? Heard anything 'bout him?"

Urson shook his lean weathered face marked by the grooves of hard work. "Nothing. Wouldn't know him if I did peel an eye on him."

The first killer had been keeping the two, Ed and Hitch, covered all

the while. He moved on toward them, the cold brutality of his eyes plain over the mask. "Who're you gophers?"

"Hitch Slade," the heavier-set one of the pair answered. "This here's my half brother, Ed Slade. We're from down Truro way. Headed for Plains City to sell our cow outfits. Never knew nor saw this Mike Corfee."

"That so? Lying ain't a healthy profession tonight, hairpin," the killer said. "They's talk a couple of Corfee's loyal ones of his old outfit have thrown in with him since he busted out.... We'll see. Git shed of your hardware. Drop it on the floor—and be danged careful about it."

Only Hitch had a smokepole. The pair came on past the middle of the car. The lank one who'd just killed so casually said:

"What the devil we got here, some orey-eyed paisano?" as he kicked aside the empty pint of redeye beside the seat of the one dozing under his sombrero. "Let's drag him outa there! All you folks'll have to come out and see Black Bart before the train goes on, anyway," he threw over his shoulder as he reached into the seat, off balance.

IT HAPPENED then, like lightning jumping out of a jug. The dozing man came alive with the speed of a coiled sidewinder. He seized the heavy cane and smashed it down over the head of the lank killer. The latter broke at the knees and the waist as he pitched backward, slammed unconscious. He careened into his partner before going floorward. The stocky hombre came out of the seat like a streak, a gun leaping into his left hand from under the worn coat. The second member of the Bart Mundy Bunch tried to recover balance, triggering once wildly. The stocky gent, anthill sombrero knocked off now, shot him through the right shoulder, sending him crashing back down beside a seat across the aisle. It was all quicker than a cow could switch it's tail in fly time. And he took over command.

"Come on!" he yelled. "Follow me out! They're on the right side of the train. We'll slip off on the other. There's a little gulch down there, as I remember..." There was a note of authority in his low flat voice, the voice of a man used to command.

He called back as he headed for that forward door of the car. "Black Bart Mundy has a tough way of dealing with folks when some of his men have been hurt....."

He led the way out the door onto the platform. There were a couple of shots from up ahead as one of the mail car men was making a stand of it there. The stocky jasper jumped down the side steps of the stalled train, then reached back to lend a hand to the blond wife, Eva Urson, who was following. Her husband came next. Then were the two Slades, the half brothers.

"What the hell's going on back there in the coach?" challenged a voice from the other side of the train.

"Follow me—*pronto prontito,* if you want to get away," the man with the patch over his eye called softly. "Bart Mundy has ugly ways of making people talk."

He led the way through a line of second-growth timber on that side. They were out in the yellow glow of the moonlight at the edge of a little gully. Behind them there was more shouting around the train. The other four in the party could see something of the one who'd seemed to be dozing so peacefully back there in the car. He had reddish hair. The wide mouth in his chunk of square-cut face had a ruthless set to it now. And, also, they could see how he moved with a slight limp, a little bent over on his left side. But it didn't seem to be his leg that was hurting him. He waved them to follow as he began down the brushy side of the gulch.

Back there in the lighted coach masked men were moving through it. The woman gave a little cry as the skirt of her dress ripped on a piece of brush. Then they were down

there in the dimness of the bottom of the tortuous gulch with its stunted jackpines and brush. The red-haired one led them northward up it in the course of a dried-up stream bed for several hundred yards. Now the wind, blowing in their faces, had wiped out even the hissing of the locomotive. They went around another bend that angled westward under the moon. It had grown shallower.

He stopped, looking around, head lifted to the wind like a hound's. Then he said, sotto voice, "Yes, the split rock there! Yes!" The patch had been pulled from his eye by some brush. And they could see now there was nothing wrong with the eye over which it had been.

He guided them past the split rock, then around it up the low side of the gulch on the west at that point.

"I don't know how wise it is to get too far from that train," Henry Urson began as they reached the top of the gulch. "I don't—"

"Bart Mundy has an eye for a pretty filly," the red-haired one said. And even as he spoke the sound of the hoofs of the riders beating the gulch for them came over the night.

There was no further argument then. To the west was a chaparral jungle with its high black stalks. The red-headed gent moved along the edge of it, hesitating twice. Then he found an animal path that snaked into it. From back in the gulch came a pistol shot in signal. They plunged into the chaparral, lost at once in its maizes, unable to see through it or over the stalks. The stalks fenced them in at either side of the path.

"This way!" The red-headed one stood in a small opening where there was a cross path. He took them sharply off to the right for some distance, the young wife breathing hard now. They seemed to be almost doubling in their tracks. Then he stopped in a small opening in the brush. Some ways off, horsemen could be heard pounding along one of the chaparral's criss-crossing paths. Once the sombreros and shoulders of a couple of them could be seen.

"Could've sworn Mike Corfee was on that train," a man's voice came on the night wind. "My tipoff on it was awful good..." They moved further away.

The smaller of the Slade brothers turned accusingly to the red-haired one. "You're him, aren't you, Big Mike Corfee!"

Mike Corfee swivelled the Colts muzzle on them. "All right. And what does it matter, now? I own the one pistol in the party...."

THERE WERE several moments of shocked silence. Henry Urson said, "I think we ought to git back to the train and—"

Corfee cut him off. "Nobody goes back there now. Nobody leaves the chaparral till daylight, at least... If Bart Mundy knew I was in here he'd cut down every stalk to dig me out!"

They could see then why he was dubbed "Big Mike" despite the fact he was little more than medium-sized. He radiated an awe, a ruthlessness though he did no cursing. There was something stamped on him that said: "Be careful."

They heard the distant riders calling back and forth again. After a while, Corfee nodded. He led them along another winding side path. Less than a quarter of a mile on, they came to a tiny clearing. A bush-popper's shack stood there.

"Knew it was right about here," he said triumphantly. It was small, crouching low, with the windows boarded up. But he worked open the door. A pack rat jumped out. Moonlight sprayed into the interior to show a rotting table, a couple of makeshift chairs, and a broken down bunk over in a corner.

He produced a candle in a bottle neck from a shelf but didn't light it until he had one of the Slade's close the door. It was a dingy little place but it was good to get out of the night wind that had turned cold. They got seated, the woman at one end of the table, Corfee across from her. Her husband and Hitch Slade placed themselves gingerly on the bunk. Ed Slade took the other chair.

Hitch produced a sack of Bull and passed it around after asking the girl

bride if she minded. Corfee alone refused; it was well known he didn't smoke. His dad had died a lunger. But he did produce a fresh pint of redeye, apologizing to the girl.

"Sorry—but I got a mite of stomach trouble." He spoke gently save when giving a command.

She nodded. With a woman's quick eyes she had noted that occasionally he put his right hand under the left side of his coat and seemed to be pressing against something. Hitch took a swig. Corfee himself took two. He was a little pale under the tan of his taut-skinned face. Then the woman broke the silence as they faintly caught the hoot of the departing train.

"Lands sakes," she said. "I don't know when I'll ever get home to father's place now." It eased the tension.

Corfee's eyes cut from her to her husband. "You folks breaking up?" he asked. "Heard you talking on the train"

Neither answered. Then the husband said, "Yep. Only been married a few months, too. Some womenfolk—"

"I have to work like a drudge on the place," she complained. "Washing and cooking and—and helping with the chores."

"Doesn't he work?" Corfee asked, nodding at Henry.

"Well-l, yes. He—he works hard. But—"

"Knew what he had when you married him, didn't you, ma'm?"

"Yes." Her eyes flashed in the candlelight. "But he could have a good job as a foreman on papa's outfit and—"

"I want my own place. I want to build it up and make something for ourselves," Henry put in defiantly.

"I know." Corfee nodded with a reminiscent look in his eyes. "Yes...." He pressed that side again. "Sorta dangerous for a man when his woman breaks the traces and runs off and leaves him. I know."

Eva Urson asked, "Were *you* ever married?"

"Seems strange, don't it." He smiled sadly. "But I was. Years back before—before things went wrong. Helen...." He described her, talking in a low voice. And how she used to keep the place so trig and neat. How he had started to build up a little cow outfit of his own. "Then—well, there had been another gent courting her. A gambler. Handsome sorta fella. One night—they left town together.... That's when I hit the owlhoot trail."

The girl-bride's eyes jumped to her husband. He said, "I figured to sell out myself... Go somewheres—anywheres. Mebbe down below the Line. I—"

There was the faint drumbeat of hoofs on the night. Ed Slade husked out, as they all jumped up:

"Gawd help us if the Mundy Bunch find us here together—with—" He meant Corfee.

But the sound waned away to nothingness. Corfee noted that the woman had moved over to stand by her husband for the moment. When they sat down again, she mentioned:

"My bag with my clothes was back on that train."

Henry cleared his throat. "You got quite a few things back—back home Eva."

She studied him thoughtfully. "Maybe we could try again, Henry." She reached over to drop her hand into his.

Corfee smiled as he took another drink. "That's good," he said. "That's the way it ought to be....."

THE MOON had gone and there was only the chill light of the stars outside. Corfee had gone to the door once for a looksee. When he came back, he lowered himself onto the chair gingerly, like an old man. Hitch Slade remarked, listening to the car of a night bird:

"Ed, we'll be danged late gitting into Plains City. Probably miss that agent from the Pool. Aimed to git this business closed."

Mike Corfee eyed the half brothers. "Heard you fellas talking about selling out. Got a big outfit."

Ed nodded. "Well, it was fairly big when pop died and left it to us.

Then Hitch got crotchety and we split up and—"

"It was your fault, Ed." He looked back at Corfee. "We shared out the land and the stocks."

"Well?"

Hitch said there was still trouble. It was over a part of the fenceline between the two outfits. They couldn't settle on it, had come to blows once. Now they had agreed to both sell out and go their separate ways.

"Sounds sorta locoed to me," Corfee said thoughtfully. "How big a chunk of land is this you're wrangling over?"

Hitch said it was only a few hundred yards wide. The thing had occured in the spring floods when the creek had varied its course and fence had been washed out. "It ain't the land—it's the principle of the thing!"

"I ain't giving in," Ed said stubbornly. "Hitch threatened me!"

"Why you said you'd shoot any hand of mine on that hunk of land, dang you! You said—"

"Wait a moment," Corfee put in. "Blood is thicker'n water and it should stand together! My brother and me had a ruckus back afore I—well, afore I was married. Had a little business together. He took his share and went off. He was a wild un, younger than me." He paused to take a fresh swig from the bottle.

"Alf got in a fight over a card game and got gunned to death.... I always thought if we'd stuck together it'd never happened..."

After a moment, Hitch shook his head. But he was watching his half brother closely. "I won't admit I'm wrong on that strip of grazing land. I—"

"Why admit anything?" the outlaw put in. "Why don't you both have the land? That's the way your father wanted it, no doubt."

The half brothers exchanged looks. "How can we both half it?" Ed demanded.

"Simple," said Corfee. He had a slightly yellowish color now. "Throw back in together. Make it one outfit again—the way your dad meant it to be."

They looked at each other "Suppose one of you had been killed in that train holdup tonight?" Corfee added.

Hitch's face jerked. Ed looked at his boots hard. Then Hitch spoke slowly, "Ed—if you'd like to try it that way, to throw in together again, I'd—uh—well—"

Ed sort of cleared his throat. Then he got up and walked over to Hitch and put out his hand. "It's a deal, Hitch. We been damfools..."

* * *

It was about an hour later when the daylight came. Henry Urson sniffed the air out the open door. He was impatient to get back home with his girl bride.

"Corfee, how in blazes do we get out of here—and when do we leave?" he asked.

Mike Corfee sighed heavily. "Half a mile over to the west, just past the hump you'll find there, they's a stage trail. You can find it easily. You—you can go now...."

A few minutes later he dropped back into his chair. They had shaken hands with him on leaving, the girl even kissing his cheek.

"Hope the Almighty forgives me for them lies about my wife, Helen, and my brother, Alf, he muttered, slumping down. "But it helped, I reckon. It was good to straighten out some lives—after—after I busted up my own so bad.

He opened the rusty back coat. In the rising light he could see the slow-growing red stain on his left side. It was the blood oozing through the bandaging beneath his shirt. He had been shot in his breakaway from jail. And that danged drunken pill roller hadn't been able to get out the slug. He settled down a little deeper, knowing that he was bleeding internally.

It wouldn't be long now. He'd never leave this shack, he knew. But it was good to have done those last things. And Black Bart Mundy would never give him a catching, unless he wanted to come down to the Devil's own corral.....

Law Dog's Patience

by E. E. Clement

It seemed like a hare-brained scheme, waiting in the dark for an unknown killer to show up. But Lem had more than just one cute trick on the ball.

LEM took out his watch and squinted at it, holding it up so the faint trickle of light from the next room would fall on its face. "Twelve-thirty," he said. "It ought to be soon now. But we'd better shift the dummy, just in case."

"You're a dang fool," I growled for the twentieth time, "and I'm no better for siding you on a harebrained scheme like this."

"Just wait," he replied in that exasperatingly patient tone of his. "If I'm wrong, we'll know in a little while. And if I'm right, we'll have our man."

He pushed the side door open and listened carefully. "No one coming yet. Let's go." The two of us crawled out of the tiny store-room into the main office, and I groaned again at this nonsense of waiting in such discomfort for a killer who'd never show up to put a bullet into the dummy Lem and I had rigged. This was the fifth time we'd gone through this business of making our dingus appear to move from the window seat to the desk. We'd practised so that it would look real enough to someone coming up the street.

It was something that might have been fun had we been putting on a kid show. But for ourselves alone, it wasn't even amusing. "This is the last time, now," I cautioned him, after we'd gotten the dummy into the chair at the desk, it's back to the door.

"The last time," he agreed. "I figure our man has been watching this office, and he'll be around soon."

He took a bottle out of his back pocket and swallowed thoughtfully. "I'm still sure it'll work."

"It had better. You're finished, here, if you don't produce the gent who killed old Parsons tonight. It was bad enough making all the brags you made last week, then disappearing for two days; but the way you've been sitting around soaking up whisky ever since you got back has the whole town disgusted. You swore you'd break this case tonight. You'll never live it down unless you come through now and straighten out."

Lem sighed. "Pokey, you're a dang good deputy. Couldn't ask for a more conscientious, straight-shooting gent than you to side me. But you ain't very bright at times."

"What do you mean?" I demanded. "Hell, I would have handled this case sensibly from the start. I'll bet you I'd have found some traces of the drygulcher on the spot if you'd let me investigate, instead of sending me off on a wild goose chase."

"Don't you think *I* can read sign, Pokey?"

"Well... I didn't say that..."

"I *did* investigate the scene of the shooting, Pokey. Want to know what I found? Nothing. The killer covered up every dang trace; he had plenty of time to do it.

"At least a dozen gents in this town knew that old Parsons was drawing all his dinero out of the bank after he heard about some bank failing upstate. The old man's habits were known; they knew when he'd start for home, and where he'd stop for a snort. We found his bottle. We

could have saved him if we hadn't been after those rustlers, but we didn't hear about it until it was too late." He sighed. "*That* was a mistake I won't forgive myself for... not leaving you behind to keep an eye on things."

"Aw, that wasn't your fault," I grumbled. "Parsons hightails it into town about noon, without warning, draws out all his cash, then goes over to the saloon and practically advertises for a killer. Danny tried to persuade him to stay in one of the upstairs rooms for the night, but he wouldn't hear of it. ...But what have we to go on? Sure, there's several birds to suspect, but none has acted suspicious."

Lem rubbed the stubble on his chin; he'd sure let himself go to pot this week. "I narrow it down to three or four, Pokey. It had to be someone with brains enough not to leave any trace at the scene of the crime, and sense enough not to make any suspicious moves so far. That eliminates most of the ragtag around town. Some of them might have done the first, but none of 'em could have kept from tipping their hand after a few days seeming in the clear."

"Well, there's Asa Bardell—he's a smooth one. Doesn't seem to work too hard, but always has plenty of dough. Then there's Cramer...he's lost a lot of money at the faro tables during the last few months. And Ty Shinwell never liked his neighbor."

"And don't forget Doc Pollett."

"Pollett! You're off your feed, Lem. Pollett couldn't..."

"He was around that afternoon, Pokey. I'm not saying he's the one."

"Well, who was it, then?" I demanded. "You know, dang you; you sent him a note saying the jig was up, that you had proof; he's probably half way across the county by now."

Lem sighed again. "Like I said, before Pokey, you just ain't got much imagination. The one who did this had plenty...enough to know that leaving town would be just like admitting it. No...the killer will show up tonight, to make sure that I have proof—and try to finish me and destroy it."

WELL, THAT made sort of sense. It explained, for example, why I'd taken the stage out this afternoon on a special errand, letting it be known I'd be back tomorrow morning, then gotten off at the first stop, rented a horse, and come back through the range after dark. It explained the dummy set-up, though not that contraption Lem had on the shelf just above the chair where the dummy sat, or the strings we'd carefully attached to the dummy when we set it in the chair for the last time. And it didn't explain the most important question of all: if Lem had proof of the killer's identity, why were we going through this rigamarole?

"Pokey," he whispered, "would you say I've been somewhat downcast this week?"

"Huh!" I snorted. "That's an understatement. I'd say you had such a case of the sorrows I wouldn't have been surprised to see you blow your brains out?"

And I'll be danged if he didn't smile at that. "Thanks, pardner; that's what I hoped you'd say. And I appreciate your pulling me out of the way when I started across the street just as the stage was thundering through yesterday. Guess I was sort of concentrating."

"Well ... you've been concentrating today, all right, only..."

"Sssh." He squeezed my arm. "Listen."

I shut my trap and set down to using my ears. Yeah, there was a movement of some kind outside; someone was approaching the door, now, and I didn't need a nudge from Lem to know I ought to snake out my gun and watch sharp.

It seemed like hours before there was the faint sound of the door being pushed slowly open. Everyone knew, of course, that Lem had gotten careless about locking the door at night. It moved inward slowly, then someone came in. I couldn't make out

much but the figure of a man, entering cautiously.

The figure hadn't moved into the faint halo of light near the desk, where the dummy was slumped in the chair, arms dangling, a bottle on the desk before it; but I caught the gleam of metal in the man's hand as he stepped forward slowly.

It seemed as if he'd hear our breathing, sure; he paused and glanced around, looking straight at us, I'd swear. But he wasn't; his eyes came to rest on the wall, where Lem's gun and holster hung from its hook. He moved again and withdrew that gun, putting away his own weapon. The intent was plain. The killer figured he was in luck; he could shoot the sheriff with Lem's own gun and make it look like suicide.

Now the intruder was studying the dummy intently. Hell, he'd catch on to the trick. We hadn't counted on his doing this. He'd ... but, no ... he was only deciding on where to hold the gun so it'd look right. He finally placed the muzzled at a point below the dummy's right ear and fired. The noise sounded like a cannon going off.

And the dummy flopped out of the chair, pulling the contraption from the shelf down on the killer's head. I heard a choking sound; the room seemed to be full of smoke.

I DIDN'T need any suggestions. "Elevate, you murderin' polecat," I shouted as I sprang out of the closet with Lem behind me. The killer seemed to be gasping and clawing at his eyes, the gun fallen from his hand.

"Keep him covered," gasped Lem, "while I turn up the lamp and see who it is."

I sneezed; something dusty was tickling my throat. I'll be gol-danged if it wasn't flour, and our captive was a sight, coated from head to foot with the stuff.

I turned the lamp up then raised it off the table.

"Well, well, well," chuckled Lem, "if it isn't our friend, Mr. Cramer. What do you know?"

Yeah, Cramer it was, and as sorry-looking a mess as I've ever seen. I disarmed him as he tried to brush himself off. His remarks were downright ungentlemanly, but I'm used to that.

"Hell, Lem," I grumbled, "you could have told me who we was waiting for. Like you said, I may be short on imagination, but I'm not a schoolboy, either."

"All right," said Cramer disgustedly, "you got me. I was sure I didn't leave any traces. And how a drunken bum found me out is beyond *my* imagination."

"Speaking of drink," I said, "could you pass me the bottle and keep an eye on the prisoner while I take a quick one?"

"Sure." Lem grinned and took the bottle out of his pocket, the bottle he'd been nursing ... the sixth this week. I uptilted it ... and almost choked.

"Dammit, Lem, this ain't liquor ... it's ... it's cold tea!"

Lem nodded. "Yup, Pokey, that's what I've been drinking ... except for one or two shots to give me a breath. And I spilled a little on my clothes now and then for local color."

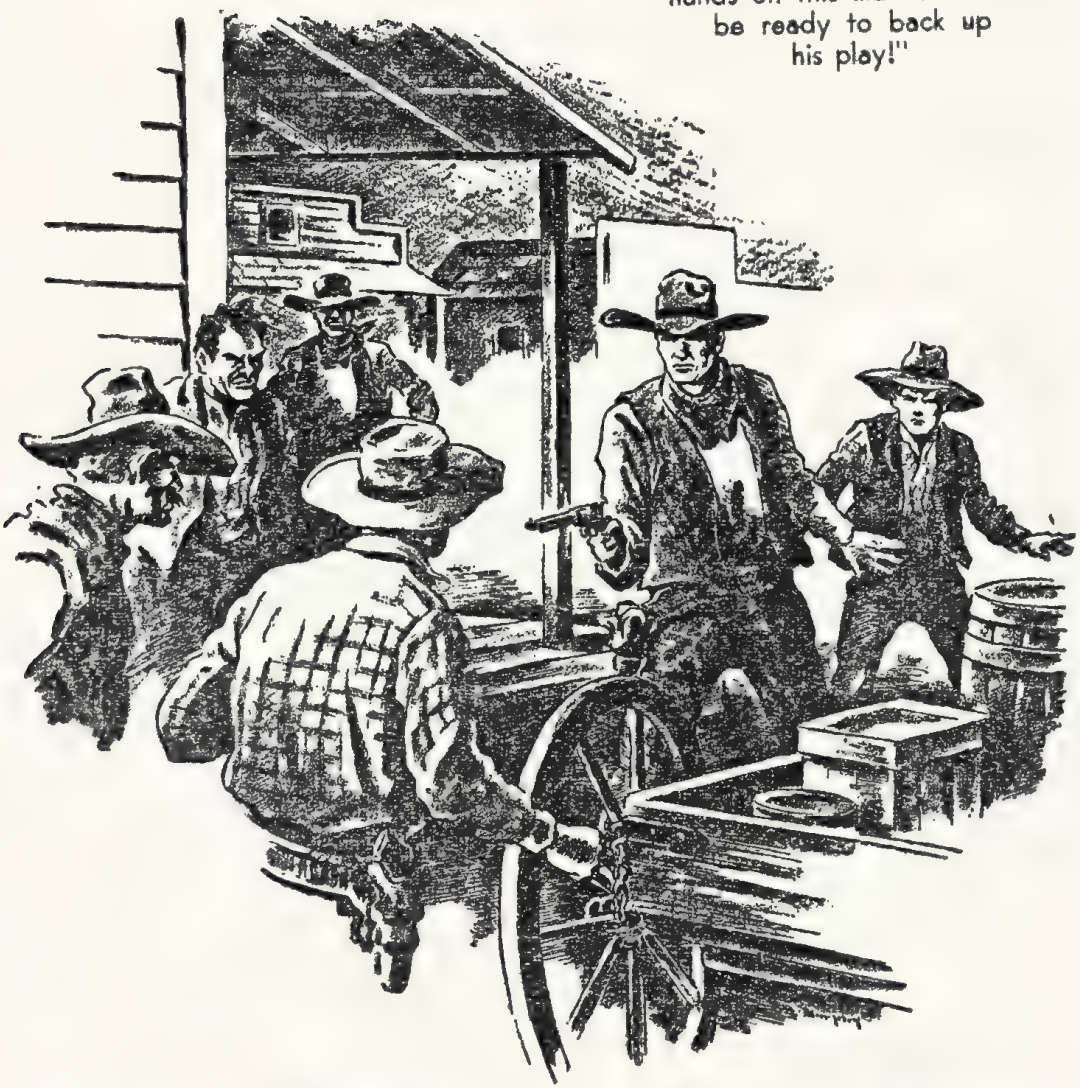
For a second, I thought the state was going to be saved the expense of a trial and execution, thought sure that Cramer was about to bust a blood vessel. Finally he sank down on a chair and said faintly. "Will you tell me one thing, sheriff? Where did I slip up? How did you know it was me?"

"To tell you the truth, Cramer, I didn't."

"But ... but ..." the rancher fished in his shirt pocket and brought out a slip of paper. "You sent me this note, saying you had proof of the identity of the killer."

"Oh ... that. Yes, so I did. Well, you see, Cramer, I sent out quite a few notes just like that one. Figured that only one man would be interested enough to pay me a visit about it."

THE END



"The first man that tries to lay hands on this kid had better be ready to back up his play!"

Run With the Wolves

by Richard Brister

Red told it straight to Jimmy: "Wolves can't run with sheep, and you have to be a wolf to get ahead — always remember that!" But he didn't tell the kid how to deal with people who could be both wolf and sheep!

"THERE'S two sorts of people in this world," big, hard-mouthed Red Garth often told fourteen-year-old Jimmy. "There's sheep and there's wolves. The sheep get slaughtered an' the wolves get full bellies. Run with the wolf pack, Jimmy. Always run with the wolves."

Jimmy was just a pale-cheeked button. He could shoot a sixgun passably well, once he got it hauled

clear of leather. But he was kind of a skinny younker, he'd grown fast and the wild, the uncertain life he led with Red never gave him a chance to catch up with himself and get his strength. He was too thin to haul his gun out very fast, and no match for anybody in a hand-to-hand battle.

Red used Jimmy for an outside man on most of their jobs. Like on this job, thought Jimmy, the one that had got that blame' posse stuck onto their backtrail like leeches. Jimmy had stood out in the street with the horses while Red went into the bank, fifteen minutes before opening hour, and bullied that sickly-faced teller into opening the vault.

They had ridden out of that desert town a whole lot richer than they rode in, but with the hue and cry floating through the air behind them. Red had the swag in a big gunny sack, flung over his cantle. It bounced around pretty wild, chafing him and the big gray gelding, Tony. There must have been a real fortune inside there, judging by the heavy look of it.

It had slowed them down, and that was how come they had failed to shake loose from the posse right at the outset. Ordinarily Tony and Sam, Jimmy's white-stockinged pony, could outrun anything the law set onto their tails.

Not this time, though. And now Red was hit, winged by a lucky shot from some posseman's rifle. And Jimmy knew in his heart that this was one time they were not going to make it. He didn't feel at all like a wolf now. He felt like a sheep, and he felt like crying, when he saw the patch of red growing down the side of Red's sweat-soaked shirt.

Red suddenly hauled up short on Tony. He got down, kind of stiff and painful, took the gunny sack down and walked down into the ravine that bordered the right hand side of the trail.

"Follow me, kid," he growled. "Hurry. This ain't no picnic."

Jimmy knew it wasn't. He slipped out of saddle and clambered down the steep, boulder-strewn side of the ravine. Red had pulled up short by a big outcropping of stone that was shaped like a thumb. He was down on his knees, digging like a dog in the loose dirt around the base of that outcropping.

Down the long trail they had travelled you could hear the thin cries of the posse. Red snapped, "Don't just stand there, kid. Gimme a hand."

Jimmy dug too, and when the hole was big enough to suit Red, he slapped the gunny sack into it, and pulled the pileup of earth back over it, smoothing everything out to make it look natural.

"Take a good look at that rock, kid."

Jimmy looked at it, swallowing hard. "Y-you'll remember it too, Red."

"I won't remember nothin'." There was a bitterness to Red's mouth, and a wild something in his eyes that Jimmy used to see there when Red was full of likker. "I'm through, kid. I ain't going to get away with it this time... Now wipe that sick look off your face. When you run with the wolves, you got to learn to control your emotions."

"I-Im scared, Red."

Red's hand came around and slapped Jimmy hard on the mouth, sending the younker sprawling down the side of the ravine. Jimmy stood up, wiping the welt on his face with experimental fingers, looking at Red Garth without expression. It was not the first time Red had hit him.

"That'll learn you to go to pieces with a posse less'n a mile away," Red snapped. "Dress up them marks you made. Move now."

Jimmy smoothed over the tracks he had made, then looked at Red. Red's face was dead sober. "Listen to me, kid. I ain't going to beat my way out of this, and they's only one thing I'm askin' from you now. Make good use of that boodle. Don't let them lay their lily hands on it. I ain't never had much out of life, but by God, nobody can say I never left my kid nothin'."

"Aw," Jimmy said, "you can still

[*Turn To Page 84*]

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ride. You can—"

"That's right. I can still ride, maybe two, three miles, then fall out of my saddle too weak to shoot me a couple posse members for company on the way out. I ain't planning on having it that way, kid. Just you remember what I'm tellin' you now, kid. You make good use of that boodle."

They had climbed back to the trail where the horses waited. Red looked carefully at the side of the ravine, then mounted stiffly. He did not look at Jimmy. He turned Tony down trail, toward the posse.

"I'll hold 'em awhile, kid. Ride now. You and Sam can outrun 'em."

Jimmy turned the pony's head uptrail, feeling a dull weight in his chest, feeling somehow like a traitor to everything he believed in. He went a few hundred yards, at a snail's pace.

He heard a single shot ring out, somewhere back there where the posse was coming, and a sob escaped from him. He swung Sam around and spurred the little pony down trail.

"Red! Red!" he called. "Turn around. We can outrun 'em."

Sam was sure-footed enough, but to be spurred pellmell down a rocky trail was asking a little too much of the tired pony. He slipped and went down. Jimmy was hurled headling over the horse's head. He hit on his hands, saw a big rock looming, and tried to protect himself from it. But he was flying too fast. He struck his head on the rock, and thought for a fleeting moment that his skull was ripped open. Then a black cloud draped him...

THERE WAS a fire, beside which Jimmy lay on a couple of blankets. A lot of men stood around the fire, talking in the sharp, edged voices of exhaustion. Jimmy became the center of attention when his eyes opened.

"Howdy, kid," said a tall, black-bearded man with a star on his vest. "Where's the money?"

Jimmy felt the lump on his head. Even that small movement sent thumping pulses of pain through his temples. "What happened to Red?" he said weakly.

The tall man with the law badge said irately, "I said where's the money?"

As he snapped the words out, he stepped toward Jimmy, as if to kick at the younker. The movement gave Jimmy a fleeting glimpse of something tall and too familiar dangling from the limb of a tree, over at the other side of the fire. A feeling of nausea clutched at him, then turned to hatred of all these men who had done that to Red.

"You hear me talkin' to you, kid?" said the badge toter. He would have given Jimmy the toe of his boot this time, but another man, younger and with a gentler set to his mouth, caught the older man by the arm.

"Let up on it, Mart. He's just a scared button."

"He's a thief just like Red was. And he'll talk, if I have to bust it out of him. You realize they got forty-six thousand out of the bank? Your money. My money. This kid knows where it is, and by—"

"He may not."

The lawman spat. "You was always a soft one, Dannay." He glared down at Jimmy. "I'm gettin' impatient with you, kid. Where's that money stashed away?"

Jimmy looked at him with brittle defiance in his blue eyes.

"You wanta join him on one of them hangropes?" said the lawman.

Jimmy felt fear clutch at him, but his eyes remained steady.

"Kid's got guts," somebody said in the group behind the lawman. "Let up on him, Mart. Maybe he don't know where the cash is."

"He knows. Where's that money, kid? Where is it?"

Jimmy's lips didn't move a fraction.

"He ain't going to talk, Mart."

"He'll rot then. There's places to salt away kids like him. He'll be an old man before he runs loose to go thievin' again."

"Let up on it, Mart," said the younger man who had already taken Jimmy's part against the lawman.

[*Turn To Page 86*]

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"This kid's no criminal. Not even Red's flesh-and-blood son, accordin' to what I've heard. They say Red took care of the kid after his real pop got in the way of one of Red's bullets, on a stage holdup. Red raised him on the dodge, figuring the kid could help him when he grew up, and—"

"That's a lie!" Jimmy exploded. "That's a filthy lie, mister. Red was a heap sight more man than anyone on this posse."

"So you *can* talk," said the younger man. He grinned at the hard-eyed badge toter. "It ain't going to prove much, slappin' this younker in a filthy jail cell, Mart. It ain't exactly his fault he's been ridin' the owl-hoot. What say if I take him out to the ranch and see if hard work, good grub and a square deal don't straighten him out some?"

"It ain't legal, Dannay," said the lawman. "Besides, only a dang', soft-headed fool'd make such an offer. Red Garth raised this kid real mean. He'll turn on you, quick as a rattler, for your kindness."

"I'll take that chance," Dannay said.

"I don't want nothin' from you, mister," said Jimmy.

"It ain't legal," repeated the lawman. "This kid was in on the holdup, and—"

"He just waited outside," Dannay said. "Holdin' Red's horse. And he'd of been killed if he hadn't obeyed Red's instructions, like as not."

"That don't signify, Dannay. He—"

"You got this kid marked down on your ledger for any specific crimes, Mart?"

"Well, no. But—"

"Let me have him awhile at the ranch, Mart. I'll be responsible for him out there."

Apparently Jimmy's unflinching attitude in the face of the marshal's threats had won him other allies among the posse members, for a murmur of approval greeted Dannay's plea. One man said, "Bill Dannay's got a way of charmin' the cussedness out of anything breathin', Mart. Mebbe he could charm some infor-

mation out of the kid, if you give him the chance."

For the first time, the lawman seemed to waver. "How about that, Dannay? Think you could learn the kid to act reasonable about where him and Red stashed that booty?"

"I think so," Dannay said, "if you'll give me time."

HIS RIDE to Bill Dannay's Lazy D ranch was torture for Jimmy. His head throbbed with each step of the pony. Several times, Bill Dannay, who seemed to understand what pain Jimmy was undergoing, said, "Want to stop and rest awhile, son?"

But each time, Jimmy shook his head firmly at the young rancher, refusing to break silence. At the Lazy D bunkhouse, where Bill Dannay showed him his bed, Jimmy finally said, "If you figure to soften me up so I'll talk, mister, you better figure some more."

Bill Dannay looked soberly at him. "The only reason I let them talk up that angle, back at the fire," he said, "was to swing the marshal over on my side. I brought you out here to try to help you, Jimmy, not to pump information out of you."

"Whatta you want to help me for?" Jimmy said suspiciously.

"Because I don't think Life's dealt you a fair hand of cards. Not so far."

"You mean you took my part against the marshal for nothing? You ain't after a thing out of me?" Jimmy said incredulously.

"That's right," said the pleasant-faced young rancher. "What's so strange about that?"

Jimmy could hear Red's voice saying: "Two sorts of people in this world, kid. The sheep and the wolves. You run with the wolf pack, see? Always run with the wolves."

Jimmy looked at Bill Dannay, and his lip curled a little. "I guess there ain't nothing too strange about it," he said. "I guess I see where you fit into the picture, mister."

Bill Dannay's youngish face went hard for a moment. "Get a good night's sleep, son. I'm soft, but I'm

[*Turn Page*]

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not all softness. You're going to work for your keep here." He turned on a spur-jingling bootheel, and walked out of the Lazy D bunkhouse.

Jimmy grinned after him. "You're one of the sheep, mister," he half-whispered. "You don't fool me. And I run with the wolves."

A fourteen-year-old kid can't very well organize his own wolf pack, however. Jimmy did work hard around the Lazy D ranch buildings. He sometimes lay exhausted on his bunk, staring up at the ceiling rafters, telling himself he was going to line out of this place. But line out where? He was all alone in the world, with Red gone.

He could see the folly of running away with no place to run to, and so he stayed on, despising the place and the work he did, a virtual prisoner of easy-going Bill Dannay.

He saw a good deal of Bill Dannay at meal times, when Ching rang the big triangle and the hands trooped into the house like a bunch of trained seals. Dinner was a pleasant affair at the Lazy D. Talk was idle, with a lot of good-natured kidding and horsing around among the hands, who were all rather slow-witted, in Jimmy's estimation.

A pack of sheep, he told himself, and sometimes his conscience bothered him when he recalled Red's instructions to him.

"Run with the wolf pack, kid. Always run with the wolves."

A man named Mandel drifted in one afternoon. He was a wiry little fellow with bandy legs. He had a way of jerking his lower lip at you every couple of seconds. There was a big knife wound scar running down the right side of his face. He looked pretty worn out and hungry. He hit Bill Dannay for a job, and the young rancher took him on.

Jimmy Garth and Buck Mandel became friends. Mandel seemed more impressed than the others by Jimmy's owlhoot background. And when Jimmy asked Buck what he'd been doing for a living, Buck gave a knowing smile and said, "A little of this and a little of that, kid. Mostly that."

RUN WITH THE WOLVES

Jimmy could understand that kind of talk. He spent all his spare time with Mandel, from then on. After all, two wolves surrounded by a flock of sheep ought to stick together.

Ranch life can grow dull, especially at the age of fourteen, and Bill Dannay invited Jimmy to ride the buckboard with him on the monthly trip to town for provisions.

"I don't want no favors," said Jimmy.

"It's no favor I'm doing," said the young rancher. "It's a long ride and I want company. And there'll be a good deal to carry."

"Well, all right then," said Jimmy.

Bill Dannay took a slight detour on the way to town. It seemed there was a lady named Laura Carewe at the Circle C, and Bill Dannay had some business with her under the cottonwood tree at the back of the Circle C ranch house: This business took the better part of an hour, during which time Jimmy fretted and fumed. Monkey business, he called it. He was forced to admit, though, that if a grown man had to go getting goofy about a girl, it helped for the girl to be real breath-taking pretty, like this Laura.

Jimmy noticed that Bill Dannay whistled all the way to town, after leaving the Circle C, and his lip curled.

"Just a sheep," he thought. "When I'm full growed, there ain't no one girl'll snare me, no matter how pretty. Me, I'll always have a dozen or so on the string, an' I'll never get married to any of 'em. Never heard tell of a wolf gettin' married."

JIMMY NOTICED a strangeness in the air when he and Bill Dannay rolled down the main drag of the town past the *Cattleman's Bank* and hauled up in front of the *Dry Goods*. There were a lot of men lining the plank walks, just idling, and there was a hardness in their faces when they looked toward Jimmy.

They came over to where Bill Dannay was tying his mare to the

[*Turn To Page 91*]

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hitch rack, and one of them, a big, two-hundred-pound ranny with a flat, beefy face, said, "You got your nerve, Bill."

"Have I?" Dannay said mildly. "How come, Bud?"

"Haulin' that little thief into town. Flauntin' him right in our faces, here in front of the bank him and Red rifled."

"This boy is no thief," Bill Dannay said. "He did what he was told. Just as any fourteen-year-old would do in the same situation."

"He knows where our money is," snapped an irate man in the back of the group. "It's writ in his weazel eyes. Any one but a softhead like you would be able to see that, Dannay. You realize that bank's closed on account of that kid?"

Jimmy looked toward the bank, and for the first time noticed the boards over the doors. He watched Bill Dannay's face, wondering how the young rancher would stand up against the crowd's growing anger.

"I realize the bank's closed. Happens I had a good deal of my money in it," Bill Dannay announced drily.

"We want our money, Dannay. The kid knows where it's hid. If he ain't ready to talk, mebbe we oughtta take the little runt off your hands and encourage him just a leetle."

"This boy was remanded into my custody by the marshal," Bill Dannay said firmly. "Where *is* Mart, anyway?"

"Happens he ain't in town today, Dannay," a gap-toothed man said. "Rode out on some errand."

"Since the law ain't in town," said another, "mebbe we might's well just take the law in our own hands."

Jimmy swallowed, and he could feel his heart pound, but then Bill Dannay said, "The first man that tries to lay a hand on this kid had better be ready to back up his play. I'm responsible for this kid, and I mean to protect him." The young rancher's face was white. His brown hand hung close to the dangling sixgun at his hip, and after a moment, the men moved aside, grumbling, and made a

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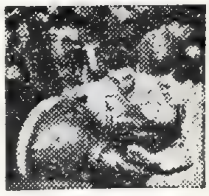

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path for him and Jimmy into the *Dry Goods.*

Jimmy was puzzled. Red always said the world was made up of two kinds of people, the sheep and the wolves. Red hadn't said anything about a man that was part sheep and part wolf though. It took a whole lot of man to face down a mean-tempered crowd. Jimmy felt a growing respect for Bill Dannay and was bothered by it.

"What'd you take that chance for?" he said, feeling a little peeved because of this new debt he owed his tall benefactor.

"You deserve a chance to straighten out," Bill Dannay said quietly. "I intend to see that you get it."

"I don't need no straightenin' out," grumbled Jimmy.

"None of us does, in his own opinion. That's a trick Life plays on us, Jimmy. It takes an exceptional man to see the blind spots that cloud up his own vision. It takes even more manhood to correct a wrong attitude when you've seen the wrongness."

"You're too deep for me," said Jimmy, looking down.

"Son, you grew up on the dodge, listenin' to Red Garth's opinions about this and that and the other."

"What's wrong with Red Garth's opinions?" flared Jimmy.

"They're all right to die by," said the young rancher. "But not much good to live by, Jimmy. Red's taught you to look down your nose at a man who'll work for his bread and butter. I've noticed the look on your face out at the ranch when you're doin' your chores, son. There's nothing disgraceful about work, and someday you'll see that. There's a certain pattern to living, and you got to fit yourself into that pattern, if you're ever to draw a happy breath in those lungs and get a smile to grow on that face of yours, Jimmy."

"That's your way, maybe," said Jimmy. "Me, I'll stick by what Red taught me."

"I was afraid of that," sighed the rancher. "Red got you mighty young. But I'm not giving up to

him, Jimmy. There's a lot of good stuff in you. It'll come out, in a showdown."

Jimmy tried to keep a sour, brittle look on his face, but couldn't help softening up some inside. It was pleasant, he found, to know that Bill Dannay found something to admire in him.

Then he thought of Red, and he went hard. Run with the wolf pack, he told himself. He thought of that money, stashed away by the big outcropping that looked like a thumb. Someday, he'd ride out and get that money, and then keep right on riding. He'd have to wait till he was older though, because a fourteen-year-old couldn't spend much money without attracting suspicion.

THE FLASH storm came up about three in the morning, during the following week. Bill Dannay's main herd, as luck would have it, had been driven up onto a high ridge, where the feed was better. The boys on night guard made a valiant attempt to hold the bunch, but there was no human means to keep those critters from stampeding.

The storm drove the crazed cattle straight toward trouble, in the form of a forty-foot cliff face. Fully three quarters of the poor devils plunged over in a bawling, tragic melee, and dawn found every face at the ranch houses drawn and haggard with worry.

It was a mighty cruel stroke, with no particle of sense behind it, and Jimmy couldn't help succumbing to the general mood of depression. Especially when he saw that Buck Mandel, who prided himself on being cold toward other men's troubles, had softened some too.

"Doggone crime," Buck said. "I'm a pretty mean dog, but I ain't so mean I'd bite the hand that's fed me when I was hungry. I'm sorry for Dannay and I ain't ashamed to say it."

"You sure changed your tune," said Jimmy. Buck had steadfastly posed as a real ugly customer in front of the youngster.

[*Turn Page*]

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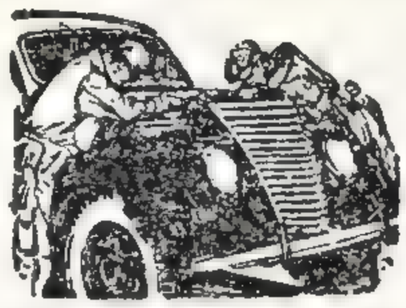

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"There's a time to change a tune," said Buck Mandel. "Dannay ain't a man to lay his troubles out in public. He's tryin' to hide it, but to judge from the look on his face, this'll just about break him."

Jimmy felt kind of mean inside, for some reason. He went out back of the bunkhouse, wanting to think things over. Bill Dannay had worked hard for seven years, building the Lazy D up to a going proposition, and now, in the snap of a finger, it was all going to pieces. Jimmy still had a certain disdain for anybody who worked as hard as Bill Dannay worked. Nothing in life was worth so much effort, as Jimmy saw it.

Or was it? Sometimes he wondered. He was getting all mixed up inside, here lately. Bill Dannay was a sheep, in a way, but there was a lot in the man that Jimmy was forced to admire. Once he even had succumbed to the wish that he could grow up to be like Bill Dannay. But Red's voice had slashed at him: "Always run with the wolves, kid."

And Jimmy's mouth hardened.

* * *

It was after dinner, that same tragic day, that Buck Mandel came hunting Jimmy in the bunkhouse. The man had a dead sober look on his face as he said, "Come with me, kid."

Jimmy followed, curious, and Buck Mandel led him through the dusk toward the side of the ranch house that gave onto the veranda. There, they could make out the low drone of voices, and Buck gripped Jimmy's arm, telling him to be quiet and listen.

Jimmy didn't feel right about listening, because it was Laura Carewe sitting there on the veranda with Bill Dannay. She had brought some of the Circle C riders over in the afternoon, to see if they could help. But now Bill and the girl were talking about more personal things.

It wasn't hard to piece it together. Bill Dannay was trying to explain to the girl that he was broke now, and he was telling the girl he couldn't expect her to wait for him

to get back on his feet so they could be married.

"Maybe I want to wait, Bill," she said.

"I wouldn't let you, Laura. I'm done. This was the crowning stroke. I lost pretty heavily on that bank thing, you know. Thought I might skin through if I had a good year out here. But last night's cost me a good ten thousand dollars. My duty now is to sell out and pay off my debts, if I can, and then think of a new start."

"Poppa would lend you something to see you through, Bill. You know that."

"I wouldn't let him do that, Laura."

"But—"

"It's no good talking, Laura. A man's got to do what seems right. You can't compromise with your integrity at a time like this, not and keep a clear conscience."

"H-how much did you lose at the bank, Bill?"

"About eight thousand. Why?"

"If that money that was stolen could be recovered—w-wouldn't it see you through this mess? I mean —if you'd just talk to Jimmy, and ask him—"

"I gave him my word, Laura. When I brought the kid out here I promised him I'd never try to pump information out of him. I meant that, when I said it, and I'm not going back on my word now."

Jimmy felt something cottony jam in his throat. He was suddenly ashamed, skulking there at the corner of the building, eavesdropping on the man who had gone out of his way to help him. He walked back toward the bunkhouse and Buck Mandel followed.

"He's pretty square, Bill is," Buck Mandel said. "You see how it is? The ranch will go on the auction block, and we'll all be out looking for another place to stay, kid."

"Leave me alone," said Jimmy.

"What's the matter?" Buck said. "I was just sayin'—"

[*Turn Page*]

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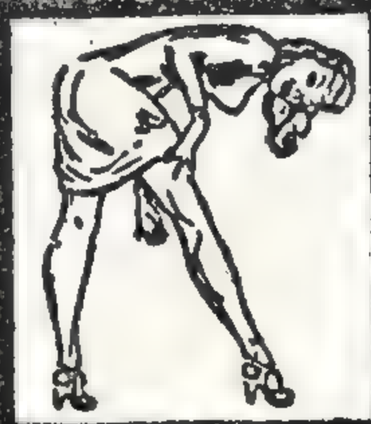

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"Leave off, Buck. I don't want to hear it."

BUT HE HEARD it from his own inner voices, in the minutes that followed. He walked out back of the bunkhouse, and the battle was really going on inside of him. *Bill Dannay is the best friend you ever had, and you ought to help him in this crisis,* one camp was saying.

Run with the wolf pack, chimed in another group of inner voices. Jimmy felt as if he were being torn apart, and this mental torture was more painful than anything in his experience to date. He suddenly slapped his Levi-clad leg and muttered, "By golly, I'll do what I can for Bill, then I'm clearin' out."

He went into the stables and saddled Sam hastily. In the dark of this moonless night, he led the pony away from the ranch buildings, then mounted and rode hard for the trail where he and Red had been trapped by that posse. He moved his belt around, so his jouncing sixgun wouldn't chafe him.

He had taken this ride many times, in imagination. He had no trouble finding the trail. Nor did he have any difficulty finding the thumb-shaped outcropping down on the slanted side of the ravine, where he and Red had buried the gunny sack with the money taken from the bank. He was down on hands and knees, grubbing anxiously into the loose earth, when a voice spoke from somewhere behind him.

"Thanks for leadin' me to it, kid. Now I'll give you a couple of seconds to say your prayers, before I let you have it."

"Buck!" cried out Jimmy. "Buck, it's me. Jimmy! You going crazy? How'd you get here?"

"I knew that money had to be hid somewheres along this stretch of the trail, kid. Red Garth wouldn't stash the swag until he figured the jig was up for him. I knew you was getting soft inside, too, and that you'd be riding out here to get that money and hand it over to Bill. I beat you here, kid. I come a different way, and rode harder. I was waiting for you when you come up the trail. I sneaked up behind you

on foot. You was making such a racket digging that you never heard me. It's a shame you ain't smarter, sonny. You might of lived longer."

"You're going to shoot me," said Jimmy in a toneless voice, "and ride off with the swag. Is that it?"

"You're smartenin' up kinda late, kid."

"You're making a mistake, Buck. The money's not here. I thought this was the place, but I made a mistake."

"You tryin' to pull somethin' fast, you little coyote?" Buck Mandel was snarling. "Jest you hold still. One move and I'll blow a tunnel right through you."

Jimmy could hear the man clambering up the side of the ravine, puffing a little from the exertion. It was a wild chance he took, but he knew he had just a few seconds left now, and he thought he might as well go down fighting. He suddenly leaped backward, then balled himself up like a human spider and let the steep incline of the ravine side carry him downward.

He heard Buck Mandel snarl at him, then came the booming crash of the man's sixgun. The slug plunged into the rubble beside Jimmy's head as he rolled, kicking a splinter into his cheek. He rolled right up and onto his feet, and now he was getting his own gun out.

Buck Mandel was trying to turn to keep Jimmy in range, and the older man was having a hard time to keep his balance while turning, on such uneven ground. Jimmy had counted on that. He was not too greatly surprised when Buck's second slug whistled past him, just grazing his side.

Jimmy's gun banged and kicked in his small hand, and Buck Mandel was hit. He swore violently as the slug knocked him off balance, up against the sloping ravine wall. He tried to get his gun up for another shot, but his foot skidded out from underneath him, and he was suddenly rolling down toward Jimmy. The gun went off harmlessly as he rolled, and then skidded lose from the injured man's lax fingers.

Jimmy stepped aside, and looked down his own gun barrel at Buck Mandel. He picked up Buck's gun and thrust it under his belt. "I reckon from now on I'll be handin' out the instructions, Buck. You and me are ridin' in to the ranch with that booty."

On the way in he had time to think. Riding with the wolf pack seemed less attractive than it once had. Buck Mandel was a wolf, after all. And somehow Buck didn't stack up very high, in Jimmy's estimation, against a fellow like Bill Dannay.

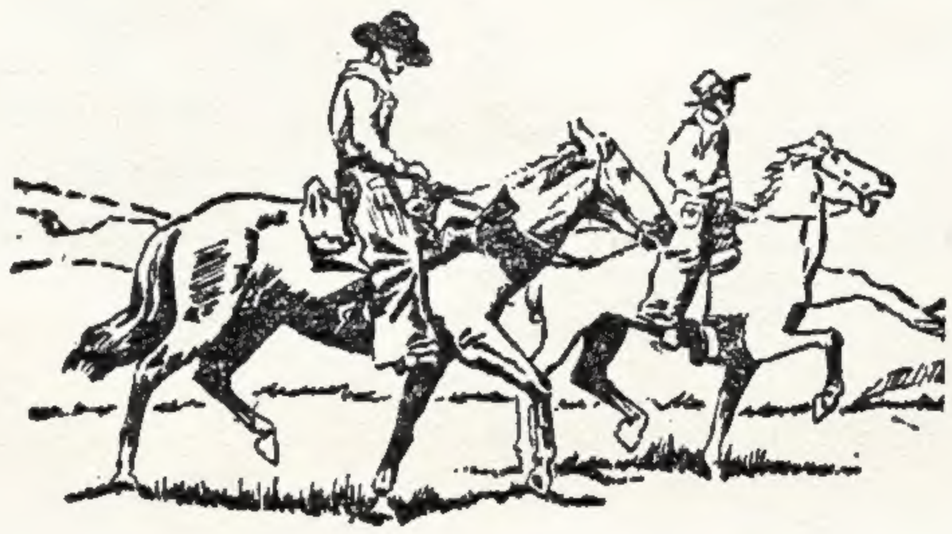
At the ranch, to which he delivered both the booty and the injured Buck Mandel, Bill Dannay shook his hand gravely and said, "Son, I'm real pleased. Not because this'll save me from havin' to sell the ranch. I always had faith in you, an' the way you've lived up to that faith makes me real happy... Wish you'd stay on, Jimmy."

"Y-you mean—after the way I held out about where that money was hid, you'd still want me?"

"I would, son."

"All right," said Jimmy gulping. "I'd admire to stay. And I'll work harder. You'll see."

He gripped Bill Dannay's hand, grinning. And this time no ghostly voices out of his past rose up to haunt him.



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The microscope can't lie – and its high-powered lenses show your skin covered with dead cells, residue from the sweat glands, and a quantity of oil secreted by the sebaceous glands. A most important factor in skin disorders occurs when thousands of these tiny sebaceous glands discharge more oil than the skin can use for lubrication. Unless special care is given, this oil film attracts foreign matter to your skin much as an oil mop picks up dust. Bacteria and fungi, tiny particles of clothing, bedding, cosmetics – are all external agents which may infect your skin. See the difference between a healthy and pimply skin in the microscopic reproductions below. The 2-way Dornol treatment attacks sick skin with *instant* action! Its detergent penetration cleanses the pores and its clinically proved medication discourages oiliness and kills infectious bacteria which are often associated with externally-caused pimples and blackheads.

Cross section of sick skin from face showing sebaceous gland plugged with drying oil, waste, and bacteria, forming pimples and blackheads.

Cross section of normal healthy skin with sebaceous plug removed. Dornol tends to keep the skin vital and healthy.

DORNOL PRODUCTS, INC. Dept. 2119
4257 Katonah Ave., New York 66, N. Y.

TRY DORNOL AT OUR RISK

We know what the Dornol treatment has done for others, so we want you to try it at our risk. A few minutes a day invested in our treatment may yield more gratifying results than you ever dared hope for. This is what we say to you. If you are not delighted in every way by the improved condition and general appearance of your skin in just ten days, simply return the unused portion of the 2 Dornol formulas and we will refund not only the price you paid – but DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK! Can anything be fairer than that? You have everything to gain . . . and we take all the risk!

Rush DOUBLE REFUND COUPON Now

DORNOL PRODUCTS, INC. Dept. 2119
4257 Katonah Ave., New York 66, N. Y.

Rush the Dornol Treatment at once in plain wrapper.

☐ On delivery I will pay $1.98 plus postage and C.O.D. charges.

☐ Enclosed find $2 in full payment. You pay all postage.

Unless delighted, I may return the unused portion of Dornol after 10 days and get DOUBLE MY MONEY BACK.

Name .....

Address .....

City & Zone ..... State .....

Be Protected in case of SICKNESS or ACCIDENT

HERE'S AN AMAZING NEW HOSPITALIZATION PLAN

NO TIME LIMIT
ON HOSPITAL ROOM AND BOARD

Policy Pays as Long as You Stay!

MAIL COUPON BELOW

You Get Doctor Benefits in case of Accident, Payment for Certain Operations . . . Even Polio Coverage.

COSTS ONLY 3c A DAY

Individual or Family Eligible . . . Birth to Age 70

This is it! America's newest and greatest Hospitalization Plan. Amazing coverage. Lower cost. Exactly what you need!

If you get sick or have an accident, you may go to any recognized Hospital (Rest Homes, Sanitariums excluded). Your NORTH AMERICAN Policy will pay for Room and Board at the rate of **$150.00** PER MONTH. Stay as long as necessary. There's NO TIME LIMIT. For loss of time while Hospitalized, due to accident, every insured, from age 18, no matter if employed, unemployed or a housewife, receives **$25.00** PER WEEK in addition to regular Hospital Benefits.

For Accidental Death POLICY PAYS **$1,000.00** . . . triple amount — **$3,000.00** — for death resulting from accident while travelling on a common carrier. Policy also pays lump cash payments for Certain Surgical Operations when caused by Diseases, Sickness or Accident.

Another important coverage—for Doctor Bills, in case of accident, POLICY PAYS **$25.00** PER WEEK while confined to Hospital. But this isn't all. Unlike most Hospitalization Plans you and insured family members also get Polio coverage—**$500.00** to cover Hospital Bills, **$500.00** for Medical Treatment, **$500.00** for Orthopedic Appliances.

Then, too, there are Benefits for accidental Loss of Hands, Feet or Eyes; Emergency Hospital Treatment for accidents involving no confinement, etc. Imagine all this wonderful value and coverage at a rate for adults of only about 3c a day, 1½c a day for children to age **18** . . . and CHILDREN GET FULL BENEFITS. (Maternity Rider is available at small additional charge.)

IMPORTANT — The NORTH AMERICAN POLICY pays you FULL BENEFITS regardless of money you collect from other insurance sources for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation. We pay direct to you! This means, if you are already carrying Hospitalization—be smart . . . buy this additional Policy, with its extra cash benefits, to protect yourself against today's higher Hospital costs. Don't delay! MAIL COUPON BELOW for FREE DETAILS.

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